

Role of Pets in Human Disease

Pets can make wonderful companions, and help keep us healthy and active. However, like people, they can become infected with bacteria, parasites and viruses from spoiled food, other infected animals, or the environment. Some of these diseases can be passed from your pet to you.

What diseases can I catch from my pet?

Pets such as dogs, cats, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, and birds can all spread diseases to humans. Disease may be spread when touching an infected pet, or by coming into contact with their feces, urine, saliva, or food. While disease does not happen very often, and is usually mild, severe disease can occur. Infections that can be spread from animals to humans include:

- *E. coli*
- *Salmonella*
- *Campylobacter*
- *Giardia*
- *Cryptosporidium*
- *Yersinia*
- *Toxoplasma*
- Rabies
- *Bartonella*
- Psittacosis
- Roundworms
- Tapeworms
- Hookworms

You may also come into contact with other animals that are not normally kept as pets such as cows, horses, goats or pigs. These animals can also spread diseases. For more information on diseases that these animals can spread, see [HealthLinkBC File #61b Petting Zoo and Open Farm Visits](#).

Who is at higher risk?

People at risk of serious problems from some of these infections include:

- developing babies;
- young children;
- the elderly; and
- people with weakened immune systems from HIV/AIDS, cancer treatment, steroid therapy or organ or bone marrow transplant.

How can I prevent infections?

Your personal hygiene and health:

- Wash your hands after handling or cleaning up after your pet, its feces, toys, treats or food. Wash your hands before preparing food, eating or smoking.
- Make sure that children wash their hands right after touching animals. Many children have been infected by touching pets and then putting their fingers in their mouths before washing their hands.
- Avoid any direct skin contact with animal feces, vomit, urine or saliva.
- Do not share dishes or utensils with your pet. Dishes and utensils are only for people. Pet food dishes are only for pets.
- Do not let your pet lick your child's face or your face.
- People with weakened immune systems should not keep a reptile or parrot-like bird because they often carry serious diseases.

For more information on hand washing, see [HealthLinkBC File #85 Hand Washing for Parents and Children](#).

Your pet's hygiene and health:

- All new pets should be examined by a veterinarian who may run some tests to screen for disease. Puppies and kittens are more likely to be infected with bacteria and parasites, especially if they have diarrhea or were strays.
- Keep your pet clean and well-groomed. Trim its nails often.
- Keep your pet's living and feeding area clean.
- Control parasites such as roundworms, tapeworms and fleas, which can be inside and outside your pet's body.
- Take your pet to the veterinarian for a yearly checkup and keep your pet's vaccinations up to date.
- Contact your veterinarian right away if your pet becomes less active or shows signs of illness such as loss of appetite, a cough that does not go away, sneezing, weight loss or diarrhea.
- Outdoor cats can become infected with *Toxoplasma* from eating infected birds or rodents. If you have an outdoor cat, place a bell on the collar or give them a brightly coloured collar cover or bib to help warn prey. Indoor cats fed store-bought pet food are not at risk for *Toxoplasma* infections.

- Turtles, reptiles (including snakes and iguanas), fish, and chicks are often infected with *Salmonella*.

Animal bites:

- Animal bites and scratches are sources of infection because the mouths and feet of all animals can be contaminated. For example, cat bites or scratches can cause *Bartonella* infection also known as Cat Scratch Disease.
- Dog bites occur more than any other animal bite and most often in the summer months. Minor animal bites can usually be treated at home.
- Clean any bite or scratch with warm water and soap right after injury. See your health care provider if a bite is deep, becomes infected, or your tetanus vaccination is not up to date. See your health care provider if the bite was unexpected or unprovoked. Your health care provider may contact public health authorities if there is a concern about rabies.

Your pet's diet:

- Feed your pet high-quality pet foods.
- It is best to avoid feeding your pet raw meat, raw meat pet treats or unpasteurized milk. Because they are raw, these products can contain germs that can make you or your pet sick. You can become infected if you do not wash your hands after handling these products or after touching your pet, which can be infected after eating or drinking the product. If you choose to feed these products to your pet, handle them safely. Wash and disinfect all surfaces and pet bowls that have been in contact with this food. Do not leave the food out, immediately cover and refrigerate what your pet doesn't eat. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #59a Food Safety: Easy Ways to Make Food Safe](#).
- Do not let your pet eat feces.
- Do not let your pet drink from the toilet bowl.
- Do not allow your pet access to the garbage.
- Do not let your pet eat other animals.

Bird cages:

- Keep bird cages and enclosures clean to prevent the build-up of droppings. When cleaning droppings and cages, use disposable gloves, do not pick up droppings with your bare hands, and make sure to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards. Avoid creating dust by using a damp cloth to wipe up the droppings. The droppings may contain bacteria that can be inhaled and cause a disease called psittacosis. The symptoms of psittacosis include fever, headache, rash, muscle aches and cough.

Litter boxes:

- People can become infected with *Toxoplasma* by swallowing the parasite after contact with an infected cat's feces. Toxoplasmosis in pregnant women can cause serious problems for the developing baby such as brain damage or death. People undergoing therapy such as chemotherapy, radiation or HIV/AIDS can develop further complications.

Safe handling and cleaning of litter:

- Keep the litter box away from the kitchen and eating areas.
- Remove feces from the litter box daily; so that the parasite does not have a chance to become infectious. Pregnant women should get someone else to do this. If no one is available, wear rubber gloves and wash your hands with soap and warm water afterwards.
- Avoid inhaling or ingesting dust when you dispose of the litter, as you could get infected. Line the box with a plastic liner that will act as a bag for the litter when you dispose of it. Change the liner each time you change the litter.
- Disinfect the litter box once a month by wiping it out, filling it with boiling water and letting it stand for 5 minutes. No other disinfection method kills *Toxoplasma*.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after cleaning the litter box.
- Cats may use your garden or sand box instead of the litter box so put a cover on the sand box or chicken wire around the garden to keep them out. Wear gloves during gardening and wash your hands after gardening or playing in the sand box.

For More Information

For more information, see the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #07 Rabies](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #10 Giardia Infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #17 Salmonellosis](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #43 Toxoplasmosis](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #48 Cryptosporidium Infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #58 Campylobacter Infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #77 Yersiniosis](#)



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