

## Is your family ready for a pet?



By Dr. Danielle Grenier

**Q:** My children would like to have a pet. What should we know before introducing a pet into our family?

**A:** First of all, pets are good for people. They provide joy, can help improve our well-being, and help teach children values and social skills. But some pets can carry diseases or may be dangerous for young children.

Reptiles, such as turtles, lizards and snakes, often carry Salmonella, a kind of bacteria (germ) that can be very hard to kill. Children and adults should always wash their hands after handling a reptile.

Exotic animals, such as sugar gliders, hedgehogs or monkeys, are not good pets for children. They can be dangerous, or they may need special care that young children cannot provide.

Any dog may bite from time to time, but some are not as suitable for homes with small children. It's best to check with a reputable breeder and do your research before you choose a pet for your family.

Wild animals should not be kept as pets.

Ferrets are not suitable pets for households with infants or small children.

Zoonoses are diseases that people can get from animals, especially when you have close contact with them.

Like people, all animals carry germs. Germs can also spread from animals if people come in contact with urine, feces or sores on the pet. They can also be spread through the air by coughs and sneezes, although this is less common.

In Canada, your chances of getting a disease from an animal are small. But it's still a good idea to know what to look for in your pet and how to avoid getting sick from an animal.

We don't catch colds or the flu from most pets. There are very few diseases we can get from pets. Here are some diseases that *don't* normally spread from pets to people: cat leukemia; cat immunodeficiency (sometimes called feline AIDS); distemper; hantavirus; heartworms; hookworms (animal); parvovirus; pinworms; systemic fungal infections; Lyme disease; and flu, colds, sore throats.

Several factors affect whether diseases will spread from animals to humans:

**The climate and living conditions:** Many of the parasites and bugs that spread disease can't live in the Canadian climate. And because our population is fairly spread out, it is harder for diseases to get around.

**Pet health care:** The best way to avoid catching a disease from your pet is to make sure your pet is healthy. You can do this by:

- getting your pet from a source you trust (talk to a veterinarian [vet] for suggestions);
- making sure your pet sees the vet regularly and has all necessary vaccinations; and
- keeping close watch on your pet's contact with other animals that might carry disease.

**Your health:** People with a weak immune system have more chance of developing serious problems from zoonoses, and should be extra careful around pets. But remember that pets can be wonderful companions for people who are sick. To find the best pet and keep it healthy, talk to your doctor and vet.

**Handwashing:** Make sure you and your children always wash your hands after handling pets. Clean up carefully after your pets.

Most diseases spread from pets to people through biting, scratching or direct contact. The first step in preventing injuries is to train your dog or cat not to bite. When a pet scratches you, clean it right away. You probably won't need more treatment if your immune system is working normally. Cat bites are usually thin and deep and may not look very serious. But germs from the cat's mouth can get into your skin and cause infection. You may need antibiotics.

Dog bites may look worse, but they're usually less serious. Dog bites don't need antibiotics as often. If you are bitten, clean the wound right away with soap and water, and ask your doctor about the risk of infection.

**If a bite breaks the skin, call your local public health unit if:**

- The animal is not yours
- the bite is on the head or neck
- the wound is serious
- you didn't do anything that might cause the animal to bite you
- the animal is not acting normally or,
- the animal seems sick

If an animal bites for no obvious reason, it may be a sign that it has rabies. Rabies is not common, but if it occurs it is always fatal. That's why health officials will make sure that the biting incident is investigated, the animal is examined and the person bitten is given preventive treatment if needed. A doctor will treat the bite, and public health officials should be called.

You should talk to a doctor or someone from your local public health office if you or your child is bitten by a wild or farm animal; or you or your child has contact with a bat.

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*For more information on your child's growth and development, get answers from Canada's paediatric experts at [www.caringforkids.cps.ca](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca) or [www.soinsdenosenfants.cps.ca](http://www.soinsdenosenfants.cps.ca) The website has new look and more information than ever. Visit often for news you can use, the latest information on your child's age and stage and helpful tips for every day.*

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