



# SAFE PET GUIDELINES



Provided in cooperation with The Humane Society of the United States

**Pets are Wonderful!** Anyone who's ever lived with a companion animal knows that the unconditional love and acceptance we receive from them is unlike what we generally experience with our human relationships. This is especially important to us when our human contact diminishes through, for example, aging or isolation because of disease.

Animals can bring a unique sense of continuity, stability, and love to our lives; in fact, studies indicate that companion animals have a positive influence on the quality of life for the aging and ill. If our immune system becomes suppressed through age, disease, or medical treatments, we become



more vulnerable to infections, and may become fearful of contact with other living creatures, including our companion animals.

While there are a number of diseases we can catch from animals, cases of people with HIV/AIDS who have contracted infections from their pets are rare. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also states that there is no evidence that dogs, cats, or any other non-primate animals can contract the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or transmit it to people.

**Zoonoses:** No, it's not what you find on the faces of elephants. Zoonoses (pronounced ZO-uh-NO-seez) refers to those diseases that humans can contract from other animals. Until recently, zoonotic diseases touched few lives in this country.

## Am I at risk for contracting a disease from my pet?

Current evidence supports the fact that pets pose a minimal risk. Your risk may be slightly higher if you fall into one of the following groups:

- People with compromised immune systems
- People with AIDS/HIV
- People on chemotherapy
- People who have received organ or bone marrow transplants
- People who are elderly
- People born with congenital immune deficiencies
- Pregnant women (a fetus's immune system is not fully developed)

This brochure will review general guidelines for minimizing your risk of catching a disease from an animal. If you are in one of the higher risk groups listed above and either have an animal companion or want to adopt one, carefully review these guidelines with your physician and your animal's veterinarian.

## For more information, contact:

**Pets Are Wonderful Support (PAWS)**  
**P.O. Box 460487**  
**San Francisco, CA**  
**94146-0487**

**Telephone:**  
**(415) 241-1460**  
**Fax:**  
**(415) 252-9471**  
**E-mail:**  
**pawssf@dnai.com**  
**Website:**  
**www.pawssf.org**



**THE BENEFITS OF ANIMAL COMPANIONSHIP OUTWEIGH THE RISKS!**

Follow these guidelines to help keep your pets healthy. Keep in mind that a little preventive care can go a long way in maintaining your animal's health, and a healthy animal is less likely to pick up diseases and transmit them to you.

## Diet

- Feed your pet a high quality commercial diet that is designed for your animal and his or her stage of life.
- Don't feed your animal raw or undercooked meats or unpasteurized milk. Keep in mind that microwaving may not heat meat sufficiently to kill organisms in it.
- Prevent coprophagy (stool-eating). Never let your animal eat his or her own or another animal's feces.
- Provide plenty of clean, fresh water. Don't let your animal drink from the toilet.
- Prevent your animal from raiding the trash.
- Prevent your animal from hunting or eating other animals by keeping it indoors. Cats can catch Toxoplasmosis from eating rodents. If your cat goes outdoors, supervise it or place two bells on the collar to help warn potential prey.

## Veterinary Care

- Have all new animals examined by a veterinarian.
- Have your animal seen by a veterinarian at least once each year.
- Keep vaccinations current.
- Have your pet's feces checked by a veterinarian periodically for parasites.
- Have your cat (particularly a new cat or an outdoor cat) checked for the Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV).

## Grooming/Flea Control

- Have your animal bathed, brushed, and combed as needed to keep the skin and coat healthy.
- Keep your animal's toenails trimmed to minimize the risk of your being scratched. If necessary, ask your vet about rubber caps that can be placed on your cat's nails.
- Use good flea control. Consult with your veterinarian about the best available products.
- A clean environment is important. Keep your pet's living and feeding areas clean. Wash your pet's bedding regularly.

## About Cats

Most cats pose a minimal risk for transmitting a disease. Cats kept indoors are exposed to fewer diseases. For more information on those diseases that cats occasionally transmit, see the PAWS brochure: **Questions You May Have About Your Cat and Your Health**. It includes information about Toxoplasmosis, Cat Scratch Disease (Bartonellosis), and Ringworm.

## Safe Litter Box Guidelines

- Keep the litter box away from the kitchen and eating areas.
- Change the litter box daily. It takes the *Toxoplasma* parasite at least 24 hours to become infectious. If possible, have someone do it who's not at risk.
- Use disposable plastic liners and change them each time you change the litter.
- Don't dump! If inhaled, the dust could possibly infect you. Gently seal the plastic liner with a twist tie and place in a plastic garbage bag for disposal.
- Disinfect the litter box at least once a month by filling it with boiling water and letting it stand for five minutes. This will kill the *Toxoplasma* organism.
- Wear disposable gloves for extra protection, and always wash your hands after cleaning the litter box.

## About Birds

Most birds pose a minimal risk for transmitting a disease. For more information on those diseases that birds occasionally transmit, see the PAWS brochure:

### **Questions You May Have About Your Bird and Your Health.**

It includes information about Mycobacterium Avian Complex (MAC), a disease similar to tuberculosis, Psittacosis (Parrot Fever), *Salmonella*, and Allergic Alveolitis.



# A healthy pet is a safe pet

## About Dogs

Dogs pose a minimal risk for transmitting a disease. Dogs, particularly puppies, however, do carry some diseases that could be harmful to someone at higher risk. Parasites which dogs can transmit to people include roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, *Cryptosporidia*, and *Giardia*. In rare instances, dogs can also transmit bacteria such as *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. These parasites and bacteria are most often associated with puppies or with adult dogs who are in unsanitary environments. Any new dog or any dog having diarrhea may need to have his or her stool tested for these infections by a veterinarian.

## Can I reduce the risk of contracting a disease from my dog?

Yes. PAWS recommends that people at risk get only dogs more than 9 months old. Puppies are more likely to harbor infections than healthy adult dogs. Following the guidelines in this brochure will help to reduce your risk of acquiring any infections your dog may have.

## About Aquarium Fish

Aquarium fish can occasionally be the source of infectious diseases. Mycobacterial infections (a type of tuberculosis) can be transmitted by aquarium fish and some skin infections can be spread by contact with infected aquarium water.

## What can I do to reduce my risk if I decide to keep aquarium fish?

Wear gloves when cleaning an aquarium or when handling fish. Thoroughly wash your hands after handling a fish. Fish suspected of having *Mycobacterium* or any fish showing unusual lumps should be removed from the tank, and the aquarium should be disinfected before new fish are introduced. Follow the general guidelines in this brochure.

## About Reptiles

We do not recommend that people at risk keep or handle reptiles. *Salmonella* infection can be transmitted by almost any reptile. Many reptiles are carriers of *Salmonella* without showing any signs of illness. Because reptiles have a tendency to lie in their own feces, these bacteria can be found anywhere (and everywhere) on the animal's body.

## What can I do to reduce my risk if I decide to keep a reptile in my home?

Use gloves and a face mask when handling or cleaning these animals or their habitat. Better yet, have someone not at risk do the cleaning. Thoroughly wash your hands after handling a fish or reptile. Feed a commercial reptile diet and avoid feeding raw meat and eggs to reduce your animal's risk of acquiring *Salmonella*. If possible, dead prey rather than live should be offered to your reptile.

## About Ferrets

Zoonoses transmitted by pet ferrets are quite rare. Intestinal parasites are common in young ferrets and can potentially be spread to people. PAWS does not recommend that people at risk come in contact with an immature ferret. Ferrets are also susceptible to human influenza and can easily pass it back to humans. Following the guidelines in this brochure will help to reduce your risk of acquiring any infections your ferret may have.

## About Horses

Zoonoses transmitted by horses are quite rare. Intestinal parasites and infections such as *Salmonella* can potentially be spread to people. PAWS does not recommend that people at risk come in contact with an immature horse, a horse with diarrhea, or areas where horses are raised. Adult horses kept in a clean environment pose a minimal risk for transmitting a disease.



## About Rabbits and Rodents

Zoonoses transmitted by pet rabbits and rodents (rats, mice, guinea pigs, hamsters, or gerbils) are quite rare. The most common problems usually come from reactions to rabbit scratches, or infections from rabbit or rodent bites. The *Pasteurella* bacteria carried by most rabbits may infect scratches or bite wounds. Scratches and bite wounds should be immediately washed and disinfected. Some external parasites of the rabbit including fur mites and Ringworm (a type of fungal infection) may be transmitted to humans.

Guinea pigs, mice, and rats can occasionally be the source for a variety of intestinal ailments including some bacterial infections (*Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*) and some intestinal parasites (*Giardia* or *Cryptosporidium*). These diseases can be spread to people by direct contact with the feces of an infected animal or by contact with soil that has been contaminated by the feces of an infected animal.

### How can I reduce the risk of contracting a disease from my rabbit or rodent?

Do not feed your pet raw eggs or raw meat. Be diligent about washing your hands after handling your animal. Follow the general guidelines in this brochure.

## Human Health Measures First aid for Bites/Scratches

- Rinse a bite wound or scratch right away with plenty of cool running water.
- Wash the area with a mild soap or with a tamed iodine solution such as Betadine® solution that has been diluted with water.
- Contact your physician.

## Hygiene

- Wash your hands frequently - especially before eating or smoking.
- Avoid contact with your pet's bodily fluids such as vomit, feces, urine or saliva. In the event of an accident, clean up the mess with a disinfectant (an ounce of bleach in a quart of water works nicely to kill many infectious organisms), then wash your hands thoroughly. Better yet, wear gloves and then wash your hands, or have someone not at risk clean it up.
- Don't let your pet lick a wound on your face or body. You never know where that tongue has been!

## Adopting a New Animal

**Adopting a new animal companion is always exciting, but keep in mind that new pets, especially puppies and kittens, present more of a risk. If you are going to adopt a new pet, an adult animal is safer. Consult your veterinarian and physician before adopting a new animal. Your veterinarian may recommend some tests for parasites and other diseases on a new animal. It is best not to take a new animal into your home until you know that he or she is healthy.**

## Animals to Avoid

**Unfortunately, some animals simply present too much risk to immunocompromised people and should be avoided altogether:**

- **Stray animals**
- **Animals with diarrhea**
- **Reptiles (turtles, lizards, and snakes) and amphibians**
- **Wild animals and birds, including pigeons**
- **Farm animals**
- **Non-human primates (monkeys): Non-human primates carry the greatest risk because of their close genetic relationship to humans. These animals should not be pets under any circumstances. It is also good to remember that the humans in the household pose just as many risks to the animal.**

**Pets Are Wonderful Support** is a volunteer, non-profit group that helps improve the quality of life for persons with HIV disease, by offering them emotional and practical support in keeping the love and companionship of their pets, and by providing information on the benefits and risks of animal companionship.

We welcome donations to help us distribute our publications. The suggested donation for each brochure is \$1.00. If you are interested in obtaining multiple copies of our brochures, please contact our office:

Pets Are Wonderful Support, Education Department  
P.O. Box 460487, San Francisco, CA 94146-0487  
(415) 241-1460 Fax: (415) 252-9471

Please contact us for information on similar programs in your area.

Editors: Vic Spain, DVM; Karen Blount, DVM; and PAWS Client Services Committee

Funded by: Humane Society of the United States; University of California/Davis School of Veterinary Medicine class of 1993; Lesbian and Gay Veterinary Medical Association

Reviewed by: Fred Angulo, DVM, Medical Epidemiologist of the Centers for Disease Control; Ken Gorczyca, DVM; James M. Harris, DVM; and Alan Stewart, DVM

Design: Maura Farrell Communications (412) 661- 8696

**Copyright 1998 Pets Are Wonderful Support. All rights reserved. Right to copy granted subject to condition that name, address, and telephone number of Pets Are Wonderful Support appear, and copies are not sold.**

