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8 Pets That Pose Major Health Threats to Kids

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That iguana in your son's bedroom isn't just a reptile. It's also a deadly-germ machine.

So says the American Academy of Pediatrics, which warns parents that many of the "easy" pets—the ones that don't shed, don't need to be walked, and don't throw up on the sofa—[pose serious health threats](#) to young children. Sigh. And here I was so ready to convince my daughter that lizards are almost as cuddly as a Beverly Hills Chihuahua.

I'm not alone. In the past few years, more and more families have turned to nontraditional pets, largely because they're considered easier to care for than cats and dogs. But they bring with them substantial health risks, particularly for children younger than 5.

Here's the lineup of no-go pets:

- **Reptiles.** Small turtles were banished from pet stores decades ago because they harbor salmonella, which causes intestinal problems that can be deadly in children. But other reptiles, including iguanas, lizards, and snakes, also carry salmonella that doesn't sicken them but could land your kid in the hospital.
- **Hamsters.** These small, furry rodents are not just cute. They're carriers of salmonella and have sparked outbreaks of lymphocytic choriomeningitis, a virus that causes [brain inflammation](#) and can lead to permanent nerve damage.
- **Hedgehogs.** These adorable nocturnal critters are increasingly popular in the United States, despite the fact that they can spread salmonella, *yersinia pseudotuberculosis* (which causes appendicitis-like [abdominal pain](#)), and [rabies](#). Hedgehogs' prickly spines also make it more likely that they will transmit fungal skin [infection](#).

- **Monkeys** and other primates. Macaques spread [herpes B virus](#), which can cause fatal [meningitis](#) in humans, and primates spread a host of other nasty germs, including [tuberculosis](#). A more likely risk is injury, since even "tame" primates have seriously injured trained handlers.
- **Baby chickens** and other poultry. So fuzzy—and carriers of salmonella. Not to mention that a full-grown chicken can live for 20 years if it doesn't encounter a soup pot.
- **Ferrets**. Small children sleeping or lying down have been attacked by ferrets, which have severely mutilated the children's ears and noses.
- **Prairie dogs**. Pet prairie dogs have caused outbreaks of [tularemia](#), a flulike illness that can be fatal if not treated with antibiotics.
- **African Gambian rats**. These critters spread monkeypox, a relative of [smallpox](#), in the United States in 2003 after being imported as pets. Swift action by public health officials fended off a major outbreak.
- **Big cats, raccoons, and other wild animals**. Exotic but way too dangerous to be anywhere near children.

"Even though contact with animals can be very good for children, each of these exposures has a risk," says Joseph Bocchini, chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center in Shreveport. He chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics committee that issued new recommendations on pet risks, which were developed along with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Even the commonest house pets pose some risks. Consider:

- **Fish**. Thought an aquarium was a safe bet? Guess again. Aquarium fish spread mycobacterial infections, which cause [lung diseases](#), [leprosy](#), and skin infections. Kids should keep their hands out of the tank and wash hands after feeding fish.
- **Dogs and cats**. Some 15 percent of children are allergic to one or the other. Both can spread multiple diseases, including intestinal parasites, [toxoplasmosis](#), tick-borne infections, and [cat scratch fever](#). Bites and scratches are a major source of injury. The

pediatricians say that young children should never be left alone with a pet, because they can innocently prompt the pet to attack.

Of course, many animal-loving parents have no intention of giving up their pets, nor should they have to, says Bocchini. Instead, parents should make sure that children practice good hygiene, particularly when it comes to frequent hand-washing. Pets need to be well cared for and kept up-to-date on their shots.

But even he admits to lapses. With two dogs and two cats in his house, the kids and the pets wound up in bed together, treats were shared, and kisses exchanged. All survived. "It's always important to try to reduce the risk by paying attention to infection prevention," he says. So hug that cat—then wash your hands.

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