

Recommendations For Preventing The Transmission of Infectious Diseases in Small Animals



CARE SHEET

Developed with and approved by a Qualified Veterinarian

Companion animals bring joy and are an important part of your family. There is nothing quite like seeing a person's face light up, be it a small child or an adult, when they interact with an animal. During the exciting time of having a pet in your home, please do not overlook safe animal handling practices. Companion animals can carry diseases such as *Lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus* (LCMV), salmonella, *Streptobacillus moniliformis* or Rat Bite Fever (RBF) and internal parasites such as tapeworms.

Lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV) can infect humans or pet rodents when they become exposed to contaminated urine, droppings, saliva, or nesting material from wild mice. Some pet rodents may carry the LCM virus and, if infected, may have long-term infections and viral shedding; many times infected rodents do not exhibit clinical symptoms. LCMV is transmitted via broken skin, the nose, eyes or mouth or by a bite from an infected rodent. Most people who become infected with LCMV do not realize they are infected, or have only mild flu-like illness.

Salmonella is a bacterium that can be acquired through contact with an infected small animal's fecal material or soiled bedding. Infected small animals may not show any clinical signs of illness or may display generic signs of illness, such as wetness around the tail region. Human infection can take place by not washing hands after having contact with a small animal, the animal's habitat or substrate. Symptoms of Salmonella infection in humans can include vomiting and diarrhea. Salmonella is of greatest concern for children due to their tendency to put their fingers in their mouths.

Tapeworms, specifically *Hymenolepis nana* (*Vampirolepis nana*), are one of the most common flatworm parasites found worldwide. Rodents infected with this tapeworm typically do not show any signs of illness; however, severe infections can cause weakness, weight loss and diarrhea in the infected rodent. Like salmonella, tapeworms are generally acquired through oral contact with a small animal's fecal material or soiled bedding. Symptoms of tapeworm infection can include diarrhea.

Rat Bite Fever, which in the United States is caused by the common bacteria *Streptobacillus moniliformis*, is a bacterial infection transmissible to people from rats. Rats are carriers of this bacterium and show no signs of illness however, they can pass the bacteria on to people via bites, scratches or accidental ingestion of contaminated rat feces. Symptoms of infection will usually occur 2-10 days after exposure to an infected rat and include abrupt onset of chills and fever, vomiting, pain in the back and joints, headache and muscle pain. A qualified physician can make the diagnosis of Rat Bite Fever based on the symptoms and testing for the specific strain of bacteria causing RBF. The rat can be tested by your veterinarian to determine if it is infected with *Streptobacillus moniliformis*.

Taking these simple precautions can keep you from becoming infected:

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling pet rodents or cleaning up pet droppings, habitats or areas where pets have been.
- Always carry some kind of disinfectant product with you if you will be handling any rodent outside your home or in an area that lacks proper washing facilities.
- If transporting your rodent to a classroom, make sure there are proper hand washing and cleaning facilities. Do not take a rodent to a kindergarten or daycare class for show-and-tell; or, if taken, do not allow children to touch the animal.
- Keep your rodent habitats, water and food bowls, décor and other surfaces as clean as possible and free of soiled bedding.
- Clean habitats in a well-ventilated area or outside. Wear rubber, latex, vinyl or nitrile gloves and wash hands thoroughly when you are done. Once the habitat is cleaned of organic material, disinfect it with a dilute bleach solution (one-half cup of bleach to one gallon of warm water) or disinfectant. Let the bleach solution or disinfectant remain on the habitat and all food bowls, water dishes, hide huts, etc. for ten minutes and then thoroughly rinse with warm water; allow to completely dry before placing the animal and the contents in the habitat. Make sure there is no lingering smell of bleach or disinfectant as small animals are very sensitive to chemicals.

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Handling precautions continued:

- Do not handle your rodent or habitat furnishings with open sores or cuts on your hands. Wear rubber gloves.
- Never let your mouth come into contact with your rodent. Some people like to give their rodent an affectionate kiss. This is a practice we do not recommend as it can transmit a disease to the person kissing the animal.
- Pet rodents should be kept out of the kitchen and other food-preparation areas. Kitchen sinks and bathtubs should not be used to bathe rodents, clean habitats or wash rodent items. If unavoidable, first remove all materials used to cook prepare or serve food, including the toaster. Disinfect the area thoroughly with a mild bleach solution when finished.
- Do not touch food, dishes, pots pans, or other utensils in the kitchen after you have handled your rodent, until you have washed your hands thoroughly.
- Pet rodents should not be allowed to roam freely throughout the home or living area.
- Young children should be closely supervised when cleaning habitats or handling pet rodents. They should be supervised or assisted in washing their hands immediately after handling a pet rodent, their habitat or bedding.
- Persons at increased risk of infection or serious complications of LCMV, salmonella, RBF or *Hymenolepis nana* (e.g., children less than 5 years of age, immuno-compromised persons and pregnant women or women trying to become pregnant) should avoid contact with rodents.
- Families expecting a new child should transfer the care of their pet rodent to a trusted family member, friend or neighbor prior to the infant's arrival.

By following safe animal handling practices, you ensure your safety and that of your animal.

Note: The information on this Care Sheet is not a substitute for medical diagnosis. If you suspect your or a family member may be infected seek medical attention.

Additional information can be found at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website at www.cdc.gov/healthypets/ and PETCO at www.petco.com/CareSheets/CareSheets.aspx?Nav=154 or contact your local veterinarian or family physician.