

Doc Talk

By Dr. Veronica Naudin



Do all Pets Carry Diseases?

Q: I am looking for a pet for my 5 year old son. Do all animals carry diseases?

A: Boys and girls love animals. They are naturally attracted to them. For many children, having pets is an important part of childhood. Animals can teach children about responsibility and caring. Children learn many things about animals when they are asked to care for a pet. When choosing a pet for your child, you need to consider many aspects of care. In addition to prevention of disease, you should also consider how the needs of the animal would fit in with the needs of your family.

Since your question asks about diseases, I will discuss a few common animals and the risks they pose.

Cats:

Cats are lovely for small children because they like to curl up in a lap and petting them is fun for both cat and child. Many parents buy cats as kittens. This is generally a good idea so that you can train a cat to live in your home. However, it is the scratch of kittens, not cats that usually increases the risk of Cat Scratch Fever. This illness is fairly common and can cause a fever and/or enlargement of lymph nodes in the neck or groin area. This illness is usually treated with antibiotics but might require minor surgery to remove an enlarged lymph node. In addition, pregnant ladies should not change the litter box of cats as that can cause injury to the unborn child.

Dogs:

As long as dogs are properly vaccinated, they pose little risk to children. An occasional dog may share his fleas with his owners, but fleas can usually be kept under control with the new flea programs. The biggest danger to children is the potential for a dog bite. However, proper education of your child on how to treat an ani-

mal usually minimizes this risk.

Rats:

Yes, rodents have become popular pets. Some children and teens enjoy the interaction of a small rat that can crawl up ones sleeve. The secretions of rats can contain a bacteria which causes Rat Bite Fever. Rat Bite Fever is easily treated with oral antibiotics. However, children should be discouraged from sharing food with a rat and from kissing their rat friends. I would not recommend interacting with a wild rat.

Reptiles:

Children under 5 should not be exposed to reptiles due to the risk of salmonella. Children over 5 who have reptiles as pets should be taught to wash their hands after handling their pet. Many pet stores also have resources on the proper care and handling of reptiles.

I encourage you to do your homework before presenting a pet option to your child. It can be quite disappointing to a 5 year old to get his heart set on bringing home a pet and then learn that his desired pet is not a good fit for your family. If you still have questions about diseases and pets, I would encourage you to visit the CDC Web site: (www.cdc.gov/healthypets/health_prof.htm)

Good luck with selecting a pet for your child.

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Please send questions and/or suggestions to:

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