

Role of pets in human disease

Pets make wonderful companions and help keep us healthy and active. However, like people, they can become infected with bacteria, parasites, fungi or viruses from spoiled food, other infected animals, the environment or infected people. Some of these diseases can be passed from your pet to you.

What diseases can I catch from my pet?

Pets such as dogs, cats, rabbits, rodents, reptiles and birds can all spread diseases to humans. Disease may spread when touching an infected pet, or by coming into contact with their feces, urine, saliva or food. While disease is uncommon and usually mild, it can sometimes be severe. Infections that can be spread from animals to humans include:

- *Bartonella*
- *Brucellosis*
- *Campylobacter*
- *Cryptosporidium*
- *E. coli*
- *Giardia*
- Hookworms
- Leptospirosis
- Psittacosis
- Rabies
- Roundworms
- *Salmonella*
- Tapeworms
- Tinea or ringworm
- *Toxoplasma*
- *Yersinia*

You may come into contact with other animals that are not normally kept as pets such as cows, horses, goats or pigs. These animals can spread diseases. For more information on diseases that these animals can spread, visit [HealthLinkBC File #61b Petting zoo and open farm visits](#).

Who is at higher risk?

People at risk of serious problems from some of these infections include:

- Unborn children and infants
- Young children
- Older adults
- People with weakened immune systems from HIV/AIDS, cancer treatment, steroid therapy or organ or bone marrow transplant

How can I prevent infection?

Your personal hygiene and health:

- Wash your hands after handling or cleaning up after your pet, including after handling their toys, treats or food. Wash your hands before preparing food, eating or smoking
- Make sure that children wash their hands right after touching animals. Many children have become infected by touching pets and putting their fingers in their mouths before washing their hands
- Avoid any direct skin contact with animal feces, vomit, urine or saliva
- Do not share dishes or utensils with your pet. Dishes and utensils are only for people. Pet food dishes are only for pets
- Do not let your pet lick your child's face or your face
- People with weakened immune systems should talk to their health care provider about the risks of disease before getting a pet

For more information on hand washing, visit [HealthLinkBC File #85 Hand washing: Help stop the spread of germs](#).

Your pet's hygiene and health:

- All new pets should be examined by a veterinarian who may run tests to screen for disease. Puppies and kittens are more likely to be

infected with bacteria and parasites, especially if they have diarrhea or were strays

- Pets that are imported may carry diseases that are not normally found in B.C. These animals should be examined by a veterinarian upon arrival
- Keep your pet clean and well-groomed. Trim its nails often
- Keep your pet's living and feeding area clean
- Control parasites such as roundworms, tapeworms and fleas, which can be inside and outside your pet's body
- Take your pet to the veterinarian for a yearly checkup and keep your pet's vaccinations up to date, especially the rabies vaccine
- Contact your veterinarian right away if your pet becomes less active or shows signs of illness such as loss of appetite, change in behavior, persistent cough, sneezing, weight loss or diarrhea
- Outdoor cats can become infected with *Toxoplasma* from eating infected birds or rodents. If you have an outdoor cat, place a bell on the collar or give them a brightly coloured collar cover or bib to help warn prey. Indoor cats fed store-bought pet food are not at risk for *Toxoplasma* infections
- Turtles, reptiles (including snakes and iguanas), and chicks are often infected with *Salmonella*

Animal bites:

- Animal bites and scratches are sources of infection because the mouths and feet of all animals can be contaminated. For example, cat bites or scratches can cause *Bartonella* infection, also known as cat scratch disease
- Dog bites are the most common type of animal bite. Minor animal bites from a pet can usually be treated at home. Clean any bite or scratch with warm water and soap right after the injury. See your health care provider if a bite is deep, becomes infected, or your tetanus vaccination is not up to date. See your health care provider if the bite was unexpected or unprovoked or if you are scratched or bitten by a bat. Your health care provider may contact public health authorities if there is a concern about rabies

Your pet's diet:

- Feed your pet high-quality pet foods
- It is best to avoid feeding your pet raw meat, raw meat pet treats or unpasteurized milk. Because they are raw, these products can contain germs that can make you or your pet sick. Your pet may get infected from eating these products. You can become infected if you do not wash your hands after handling these products or after touching your pet. If you choose to feed these products to your pet, handle them safely. Wash and disinfect all surfaces and pet bowls that have been in contact with this food. Do not leave food out. Immediately cover and refrigerate what your pet doesn't eat. For more information, visit [HealthLinkBC File #59a Food safety: Easy ways to make food safer](#)
- Do not let your pet eat feces
- Do not let your pet drink from the toilet bowl
- Do not allow your pet access to the garbage
- Do not let your pet eat other animals or animal remains

Bird cages:

- Keep bird cages and enclosures clean to prevent the build-up of droppings. When cleaning droppings and cages, use disposable gloves and do not pick up droppings with your bare hands. Always wash your hands thoroughly afterwards. Avoid creating dust by using a damp cloth to wipe up the droppings. The droppings may contain bacteria that can be inhaled and cause a disease called psittacosis. Symptoms of psittacosis include fever, headache, rash, muscle aches and cough

Litter boxes:

- People can become infected with *Toxoplasma* by swallowing the parasite after contact with an infected cat's feces. Toxoplasmosis in pregnant people can cause serious problems for the developing baby. An infection in the unborn child early in pregnancy can result in miscarriage, poor growth, early delivery or stillbirth. Children born with toxoplasmosis may develop loss of vision or hearing and have intellectual disabilities. People with HIV/AIDS or undergoing therapy such as

chemotherapy or radiation can develop further complications

Safe handling and cleaning of litter:

- Keep the litter box away from the kitchen and eating areas
- Remove feces from the litter box daily so parasites do not have a chance to become infectious. Pregnant people should get someone else to do this. If no one is available, wear rubber gloves and wash your hands with soap and warm water afterwards
- Avoid inhaling or ingesting dust when you dispose of the litter, as you could get infected. Line the box with a plastic liner that will act as a bag for the litter when you dispose of it. Change the liner each time you change the litter at least once a week.
- Disinfect the litter box once a month by wiping it out, filling it with boiling water and letting it stand for 5 minutes. This will kill any *Toxoplasma* that may be present
- Wash your hands with soap and water after cleaning the litter box
- Cats may use your garden or sand box instead of the litter box; put a cover on the sand box or chicken wire around the garden to keep them out. Wear gloves during gardening and wash your hands after gardening or playing in the sand box

For more information

For more information, visit the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #07 Rabies](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #10 *Giardia* infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #17 Salmonellosis](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #43 Toxoplasmosis](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #48 *Cryptosporidium* infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #58 *Campylobacter* infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #77 Yersiniosis](#)



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