

HATCHLING (BABY)



ADULT

READ THIS  
BEFORE YOU  
BUY THAT  
CUTE, LITTLE,  
TURTLE



COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES  
**Public Health**

## IT'S A TURTLE—NOT A TOY!

You buy a little green turtle with red jellybean patches behind its eyes, a cute “plastic lagoon” bowl with a little palm tree, and a little “turtle food” in a box or bag.

Maybe you are “told” that the turtle will grow to fit the bowl and live its life there; maybe that is what you think—after all, the turtle is *so* small. It is so *cute*. So trouble-free. An ideal pet for you, your child, your family? Red-eared sliders can live up to thirty years. Only individuals willing to commit time, energy and money should consider a turtle for a pet.



The cute plastic “lagoon” bowl with the little palm tree is to the hatchling what a car seat is to a human infant—a temporary carrier. That hatchling you brought home needs an absolute minimum of a *ten gallon* tank. An adult red-slider turtle (shown above) requires a minimum 75 gallon tank to a “more comfortable” 125 gallon tank.

Further, to ensure a healthy turtle of *any* age or size, it is vital to keep its tank at about 80°F in order for your pet to maintain basic life functions. Other basic-life-equipment include a submersible aquarium heater with a thermostat, a basking light, a good filter and the right commercial turtle food (specific to red-eared sliders). Too, “escape-proof” the top of the tank as red-eared sliders are good climbers, and can escape from their tanks.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE OF RED-EARED SLIDER TURTLES

For the first time since 1975, it may become legal to sell or buy any live turtle(s) with a carapace [upper shell] length of less than 4 inches. Turtle farmers have developed ways to ensure that these baby reptiles are salmonella free *at the time of sale*.

The proposed amendment does not address the difficulty of *keeping* these reptiles salmonella free. Nor does it recall the reasons for the ban of the sale of baby turtles 31 years ago: too many young children who played with these pet turtles were getting sick from *Salmonella*, the germ that causes salmonellosis. Infants, children, and older adults continue to die from this disease.

Red-eared slider turtles are reptiles. They carry *Salmonella*, as well as other germs and tiny bugs. They can infect native wild turtles when these pets are “humanely released” into city park ponds, streams and rivers and other water ways.

Red-eared slider turtles are aggressive creatures which multiply rapidly. Red-eared sliders have no known “enemies” in the wild. Given the chance, red-eared sliders will replace native turtles and other local wildlife, and cause serious environmental harm.

If you have a red-eared slider turtle (or any other no-longer-wanted pet), there are numerous pet rescue associations in Los Angeles County who will find homes or shelters for them. These non-profit rescue groups can be found on the Internet. For turtles, enter the key words “turtle rescue”. Look for postings at local pet stores. Ask about them at your community library. *Just don't dump your pet!*

*Special Thanks! to our Partners in Public Health at Austins Turtle Page (ATP) for allowing us to reproduce selected photographs and information from their web pages at [www.austinsturtlepage.com/](http://www.austinsturtlepage.com/).*



## SALMONELLOSIS (caused by *Salmonella*)

All reptiles, including turtles, shed *Salmonella*, much like humans shed skin cells. Human skin cells are harmless; *Salmonella* bacteria and the salmonellosis disease that it causes, are not harmless. Indeed, it can be deadly.

Across the United States, *Salmonella* causes an estimated 1.4 million cases of illness and 400 deaths each year. In Los Angeles County, 10% of all reported cases of salmonellosis involved persons who had direct or indirect contact with reptiles. Red-eared slider turtles were the most common reptile in over 50% of these cases.

Contact with these baby turtles and all other reptiles can be a very serious health risk to infants, small children, and adults with weakened immune systems.

Symptoms of salmonellosis include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, fever, and headache. Persons usually start feeling sick 12 to 36 hours after being exposed to a bacteria-shedding reptile, or any surfaces where its bacteria spread to.

Salmonellosis, the disease, usually lasts 2 to 7 days. *Salmonella*, the bacteria that causes this disease, can survive on unwashed, dry surfaces for *weeks*. Clean all reptile-exposed surfaces with household disinfectant; wash all reptile-exposed materials—clothes, towels, and such—in hot water and detergent.

If you are considering buying a baby turtle, or any other reptile, remember: no matter how clean you keep your pet, its housing, etc., it still sheds *Salmonella*. If you already own a turtle or any other reptile, wash its housing and dishes, etc., outside, or sanitize your wash area. Most important, *always* wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after touching your pet and their housing.

For further information on salmonellosis, visit our web pages at [www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet](http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet).

