Guidance for Reptile Owners and Handlers

Before you choose a reptile, it is important to consider the positive and negative aspects of reptile ownership and any associated risks carefully, particularly in households with very young children or people with impaired immune systems.

Did you know that:

- There is a small but inherent risk of salmonella, or other potentially harmful bacterial infections, associated with reptiles?
- There is a small but inherent risk of salmonella when handling raw or frozen and defrosted food, which may be fed to reptiles, such as mice, rats or chicks?
- This risk is elevated in very young children and those with impaired immune systems?
- Reptiles remain among the safest pets and the risk of disease transmission is far less than that posed by pet mammals, birds or from common human food items, such as chicken, provided you follow the basic hygiene precautions for handling your reptile and defrosting its food?

We advise the following precautions for reptile owners:

1. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately before and after handling or feeding your reptile, their cage or any other equipment, in particular after handling (raw or defrosted) mice, rats or chicks.
2. Always defrost frozen food naturally at room temperature on newspaper or kitchen towels away from food, food preparation surfaces and equipment.
3. Do not defrost in warm water or a microwave as this can lead to a risk of cross contamination.
4. Always disinfect all surfaces that have come into contact with defrosted food.
5. Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling your reptile or its food and associated equipment.
6. Always supervise children to ensure that they do not put your reptile, or objects that the reptile has been in contact with, near their mouths. Wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately before and after handling your reptile or any other objects.
7. Do not keep your reptile in rooms where food is prepared and eaten.
8. Do not allow your reptile to roam freely around the house.
9. Do not use kitchen sinks to bathe your reptile, wash their cage or equipment or defrost food. If you use a bathroom sink or bathtub, it must be cleaned thoroughly with disinfectant afterwards.
10. Dispose of waste water, droppings and urine from your reptile down the toilet instead of a sink or bathtub.

Guidance on Feeding

Frozen rodents, which have been thoroughly defrosted, are the ideal food for your snake or lizard. As the rodents are raw and unprocessed, they may contain harmful pathogens in the same fashion as uncooked meats used for human consumption, such as chicken.

If you follow this simple guidance, the risk posed by reptile food is significantly reduced.

Defrosting
- Always defrost frozen food naturally at room temperature on newspaper or kitchen towels away from food, food preparation surfaces and equipment.
- Ensure the rodents are thoroughly defrosted before feeding.
- Carefully dispose of the newspaper or kitchen towels after use and disinfect any surfaces which may have come into contact with the items.
- Do not defrost rodents in warm water or in the microwave as this could lead to contamination.

Feeding
- Always wash your hands and any equipment thoroughly with soap and water immediately before and after feeding or handling your pet.
- We recommend using long tweezers or forceps, available from all good pet shops, to offer defrosted rodents to your reptile. This prevents fingers being bitten by "enthusiastic feeders" and further reduces the risk of contamination.

Storage
- Frozen rodents, intended for later use, can be stored in the deep freezer for several months.
- Care should be exercised when storing frozen rodents. We recommend storing them, securely wrapped in a polythene bag, within a rigid airtight plastic box. Do not allow frozen rodents to come into direct contact with human food stored in a freezer.

This leaflet has been issued in association with the Federation of British Herpetologists and The Reptile and Exotic Pet Association (REPTA).