

Dangerous Pets

Warning: young children should not keep hamsters as pets, neither baby chicks, lizards and turtles for that matter - because of risks for disease.

That's according to the US' leading paediatricians' group in a report about dangers from exotic animals. Besides evidence that they can carry dangerous and sometimes potentially deadly germs, exotic pets may be more prone than cats and dogs to bite, scratch or claw - putting children younger than five particularly at risk, the report says. Young children are vulnerable because of developing immune systems, plus they often put their hands in their mouths. That means families with children younger than five should avoid owning "non-traditional" pets. Also, kids that young should avoid contact with these animals in petting zoos or other public places, according to the report from the American Academy of Paediatrics. The report appeared in the group's medical journal, Paediatrics.

"Many parents clearly don't understand the risks from various infections these animals often carry," said Dr Larry Pickering, the report's lead author

and an infectious disease specialist at the federal Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

For example, about 11 per cent of salmonella illnesses in children are thought to stem from contact with lizards, turtles and other reptiles, Pickering said. Hamsters also can carry this germ, which can cause severe diarrhoea, fever and stomach cramps. Salmonella has also been found in baby chicks, and young children can get it by kissing or touching the animals and then putting their hands in their mouths, he said.

Study co-author Dr Joseph Bocchini said he recently treated an infant who got salmonella from the family's pet iguana, which was allowed to roam freely in the home. The child was hospitalised for four weeks but recovered, said Bocchini, head of the academy's infectious diseases committee and paediatrics chairman at Louisiana State University in Shreveport.