

Peep, chirp, quack!

Why Parents Should Think Twice Before Giving Baby Birds to Young Children for Easter.



Jupiter Images

Easter brings to mind brightly colored eggs, baskets full of candy, and large chocolate bunnies. Traditions associated with the Easter season are enjoyable for children and adults alike. However, some Easter traditions are of particular concern for children, placing them at risk for serious illness. Baby animals, including baby chicks and ducklings, are sometimes given as gifts or put on display at this time of the year. Because they are so soft and cute, many people do not realize the potential danger baby birds, such as chicks and ducklings, can be to small children. Young birds often carry harmful bacteria called *Salmonella*. Each spring some children become infected with *Salmonella* after receiving a baby bird for Easter.

Bacteria that are carried in the bird's intestine contaminate their environment and the entire surface of the animal. These bacteria can be harmful to humans. Children can be exposed to the bacteria by simply holding, cuddling or kissing the birds and by contact with bird enclosures or bird environments. Young children are most susceptible to infection because they are more likely than others to put their fingers into their mouths and because their immune systems are still developing.

Why should I not give young children chicks and ducklings for Easter?

Young children are at particular risk for salmonellosis, and chicks and ducklings can carry salmonellosis at any time of the year. Each spring there is an increase in demand from hatcheries and farms to supply young animals for Easter. To meet the demand baby birds, especially chicks and ducklings, are specially hatched in large quantities and are shipped around the country. Hatching and shipping many animals at one time increases the stress upon the animals and makes

them more prone to becoming ill or shedding harmful bacteria such as *Salmonella*. The likelihood of animals shedding *Salmonella* bacteria and infecting others is likely to increase.

How is *Salmonella* transmitted from chicks or ducklings to children?

Children become infected by putting their fingers or other things (e.g. pacifiers, toys) contaminated with bird droppings into their mouths. Baby birds often do not appear dirty but may have feces and bacteria on their feathers and beaks - places where children are likely to touch. Birds might also contaminate their physical environment and children can become infected if their hands come in contact with this environment.

How do I reduce the exposure of young children to *Salmonella* from chicks and ducklings?

- Do NOT give chicks or ducklings to young children as Easter gifts.
- Do not let children under 5 years of age handle baby chicks or other young birds.
- If anyone touches the chicks or ducklings in their environment, make sure that they wash their hands immediately afterward. Pacifiers, toys, bottles or other objects should not touch the baby birds or their enclosures. If these objects do become contaminated, wash them with warm, soapy water.
- Do not allow anyone to eat or drink while interacting with birds or their environment. Keep the bird area separate from areas where food and drink are prepared or consumed.
- Do not allow chicks or ducklings on table surfaces or places where food will be prepared or eaten. Talk to your health care provider and your veterinarian about possible risk factors for *Salmonella*.

What are the signs of *Salmonella* infections in humans?

Most people have diarrhea, fever, and stomach pain that starts 1 to 3 days after they ingest the bacteria. These symptoms usually resolve after 1 week. Other symptoms might be nausea, chills, headaches or general achy feeling. Young children, the elderly and other immunocompromised persons may have a more severe infection.

Are there any government restrictions concerning the sale of chicks?

At this time the federal government has no restrictions concerning the sale of chicks and ducklings. Some states have passed certain restrictions on the sale of baby chicks.