

pets



Children can get a great deal of joy from having a pet. Pets can be loving and special playmates for children. They can help children to learn to be responsible and caring. Children's self-esteem can be boosted by having a pet. The companionship of a pet can help children to feel better if other things are not going well in their world. While there can be risks to a child's health from being with a pet, these risks can usually be managed so that you and your child can enjoy the benefits of having a pet in the family.

Thinking about a pet?

While owning a pet can be a lot of fun for children and families, it can also lead to problems if some things are not worked out before the pet arrives.

- Think about who will look after the pet (e.g. feeding, watering, cleaning cages, droppings).
- Can you afford to look after the pet - food costs, vaccinations, beds and cages, dog obedience classes, fences or gates around the house and vet care over the lifetime of the pet?
- How long can you expect the pet to live and who will care for it when the children are older?
- What is the law about the pet you want to have? Some animals need to be registered, e.g. dogs. Check with your local council about any laws.
- Do you have enough space for a pet and what exercise will your pet need?

- If you go away, who will care for your pet?
- Have you done some homework about the pet you want to have? Certain pets suit some families better than others. For instance, do you want a big or little pet, or an inside pet (goldfish, cats, some dogs) or outside pet (rabbits, guinea pigs, birds, horses)?
- Will your pet get lonely if you and your family are away from home a lot?
- Are you fussy about your garden? Will you find it difficult to keep it looking the way you want with an outside pet?

Health and safety with pets

Teach children always to wash their hands with soap and running water after handling any animals and especially before eating or drinking.

Asthma and allergies

- Animal hair, saliva and skin flakes are common triggers for asthma, especially from cats but also from dogs, guinea pigs, rabbits, mice and rats.
- Keep pets which trigger asthma outside the house.
- If possible, choose pets which do not have fur, such as lizards and fish.
- If your child has any allergies get advice from your doctor, vet or an asthma association before choosing a pet.

Cats and toxoplasmosis

- Cat droppings (poo) can be the source of an infection called Toxoplasmosis.
- This is usually very mild, but if caught by a woman who is pregnant, it can harm the unborn baby.
- Pregnant women should avoid contact with cats, especially with cat droppings. If you must clean the trays, always wear plastic gloves.
- It is also wise to wear gloves when gardening to avoid any cat droppings in the soil.

Sandpits

- Sandpits can be favourite toilet places for cats and should always be covered when not in use.
- Make sure they are kept as clean as possible.
 - Rake them to remove droppings and other dirt or rubbish. This also lets the air (a good disinfectant) get in.
 - Wash the sand with water, then keep it as dry as possible.

Ringworm (tinea) and other worms

- Humans can get ringworms from dogs and other pets.
- Ringworms are not really worms, they are a kind of fungus. These can be treated, but if you are pregnant, special care is needed. Wear gloves when treating the pet, or get someone else to do it.
- Talk to the doctor before treating any ringworm on yourself.
- Other worms that live in the gut of animals such as dogs, can cause human illness.
- To keep your children safe from worms treat your pets for worms regularly - for their own health, as well as yours - check with the vet.

Fleas and lice

- Animal fleas can bite humans too. This is annoying, but not a serious health problem.
- The chemicals used to treat fleas should be handled carefully. Follow the instructions on the packaging exactly.
- Wash bedding in hot water and vacuum thoroughly to remove fleas from the house.
- If you are having trouble getting rid of fleas from the house you can get advice about treatments from your local council. You cannot get head lice from pets. Head lice only live on humans.

Bites and scratches

Dog bites

- The people at greatest risk from dog bites are young children between one and four years, although many older children are bitten too.
- Small children are at risk not only because of their small size, but also because they do not know how to behave around dogs. For example they may try to take food from the dog, or hurt the dog without realising.
- Most children are bitten by dogs that they know, usually the family pet.

Cat scratch disease

- Cat scratch disease is an infection that appears to be spread among cats by fleas.
- This can be passed to a person after a cat (usually a kitten) scratches and breaks the surface of a person's skin.
- There will usually be a lump at the spot where the infection entered the body that lasts for several weeks and about two weeks after the scratch a gland will swell and become sore. This gland is likely to be in the armpit if the scratch was on the hand or arm, or in the groin if the scratch was on the leg.
- Most infections go away without treatment but sometimes antibiotics are necessary.

Prevention

- Young children should never be left unsupervised with a dog, even the family pet!
- Make sure children do not try to go near dogs that are eating or sleeping because dogs can become angry if disturbed.
- Teach children how to behave around animals, but remember it is the adult's responsibility to keep the child safe. Young children do not understand danger and cannot keep themselves safe.
- Help children to develop the skills to behave correctly and safely with animals - this takes practice and good modelling by you.
- Teach hand washing after touching animals (including when at a zoo or animal display).
- Make sure you regularly have worm and flea treatment for your cat or dog.

If your child is bitten

- Bites and scratches from dogs or cats should be taken seriously, because these animals have bacteria (germs) on their teeth and claws. Wounds can become infected.
- Always wash the bitten or scratched area thoroughly with soap and water or antiseptic.
- Get a doctor's opinion if the wound is large or shows signs of infection, e.g. becomes very red or swollen or there is pus.

- Tetanus bacteria can grow in an animal bite. If your child's or your own tetanus immunisations are not up to date now is a good time to have that immunisation. At the same time have any other immunisations that are due.

Birds

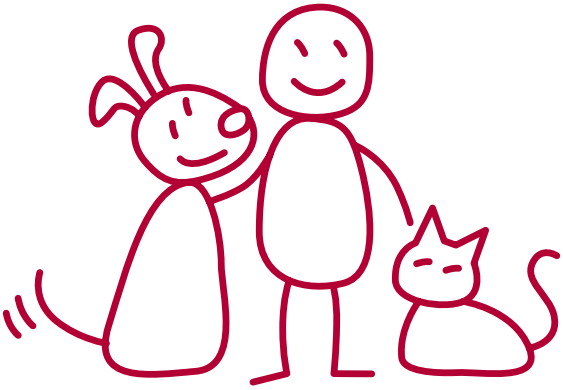
- People can catch an illness from birds (psittacosis) which can cause chills, fever, loss of appetite, headache, cough and other flu-like symptoms.
- This illness can last for several weeks if untreated, and it can occasionally be very serious.
- It can be caught from any birds, but is most common amongst members of the parrot family such as budgerigars.
- The illness is usually caught by breathing in dust containing dried bird droppings.
- Occasionally psittacosis can be caught from a bite, but this is unusual.
- The disease is treatable with antibiotics, but it is often not thought about when someone becomes ill.
- If you have an illness where the fever or cough does not go away, or you have any of the other symptoms, tell your doctor that you have birds at home, or have handled them.

What parents can do

- Bird cages should be kept clean so there is less risk of breathing in the dried droppings.
- Gloves and a mask should be worn whenever the cage is being cleaned. Wet cleaning methods (detergent and warm water) are best.
- Take care when you are getting rid of the droppings and other dirt in the cage.
- Children and adults should not kiss birds.
- Sick birds should be examined by a vet.
- Birds are better kept outside the house.

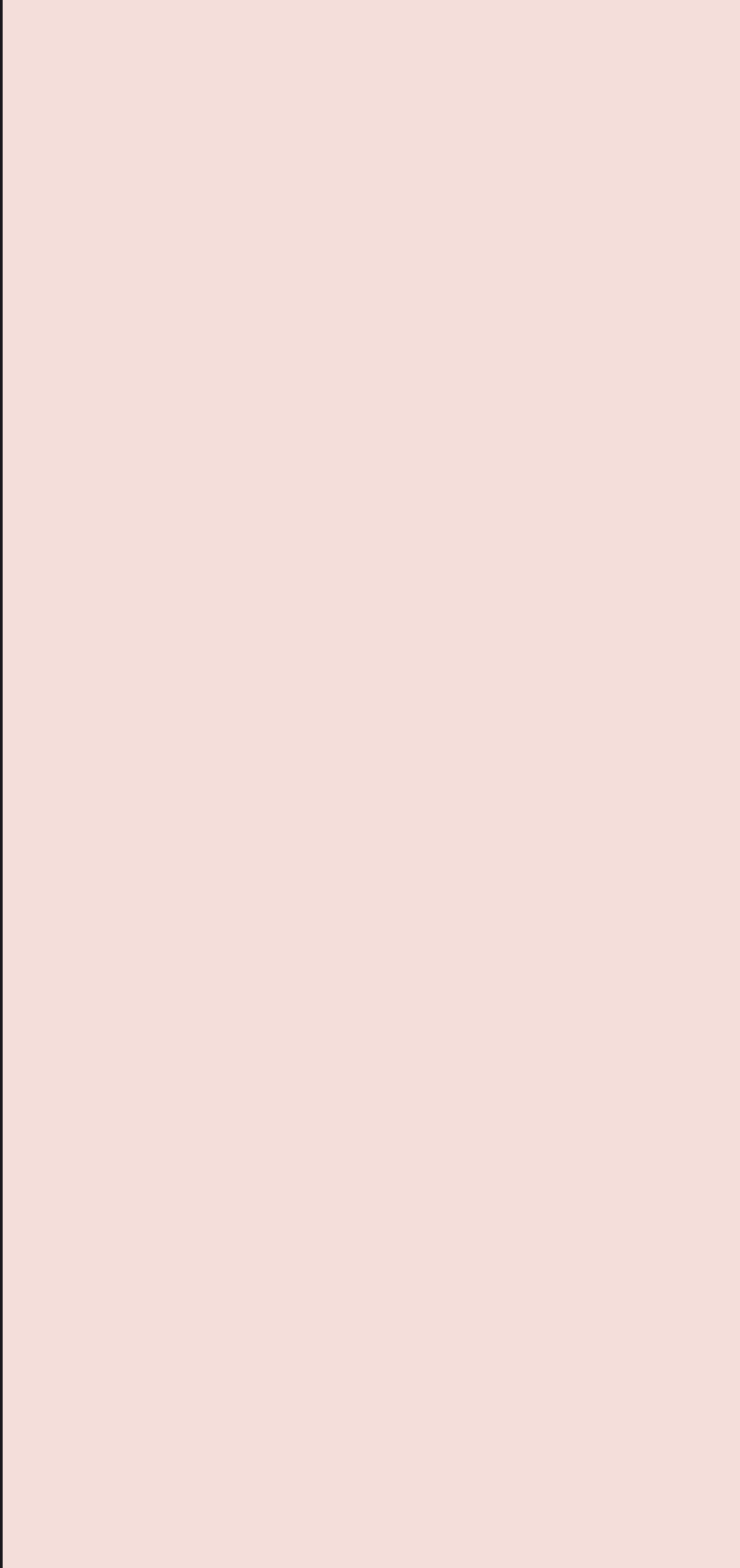
Reminders

- Pets can be very important in children's lives.
- Follow safety rules to keep your child safe and well.
- Young children don't know how to behave with pets and can hurt pets. They need to always have someone with them.
- If you treat pets well your children will learn how to do this.
- Children and pets should never be left in a car by themselves.



For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline
8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week
Telephone (08) 9368 9368
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546
www.ngala.com.au
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line
Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24hr service)
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432
- Kidsafe WA
Telephone (08) 9340 8509
www.kidsafewa.com.au
- Asthma Foundation of WA
Telephone (08) 9289 3600
Freecall 1800 645 130
www.asthmawa.org.au
- Petcare Information and Advisory Service.
(see their '**Select-a-pet**' section)
www.petnet.com.au



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