

CITY OF BALTIMORE

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HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Health Department Warns of Health Risks of Handling Turtles

BALTIMORE, MD- (June 10, 2009) — In light of the recent seizures of 96 young red-eared slider turtles, the Baltimore City Health Department, in conjunction with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, reminds the public that Maryland and federal laws prohibit the sale or public distribution of turtles with a shell length of less than 4 inches and viable reptile eggs. Reptiles and other pets may carry and transmit harmful germs (including salmonella) to humans.

Baltimore City Police Department officers seized the turtles from street vendors allegedly selling young turtles at locations throughout the city. Two individuals were issued citations. A person who breeds or sells live turtles with a shell length of less than 4 inches, other reptiles, or reptile eggs can be charged with a misdemeanor carrying a fine of up \$500, one year in jail, or both.

“The risk of acquiring salmonella infection by handling turtles should be taken very seriously,” said Interim Commissioner Olivia D. Farrow. “People who have serious health problems, pregnant women and parents of children younger than age 5 should consult a physician before purchasing turtles and reptiles as pets.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, salmonella occurs naturally in turtles and does not usually make the animals sick. You cannot tell by looking at a turtle whether it is carrying salmonella. Harmful bacteria are easily passed from turtles to people.

Salmonella infections affect the gastrointestinal tract, causing abdominal pain and violent diarrhea. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, nausea and vomiting. The illness can be fatal for young children, the elderly, and persons with compromised immune systems.

The Health Department recommends washing your hands thoroughly after handling reptiles and other pets or coming into contact with their water, food or housing containers. Do not feed your pet or clean its housing area where you prepare your food.

To report an individual engaged in the illegal possession or selling of young turtles or reptiles, please call the city information line – 311. For more information on keeping turtles as pets, visit:

- The CDC’s Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/TurtlesSalmonella/>
- The FDA’s Web site at <http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm048151.htm>.

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