

Many people think that Salmonella infections are caused only by consuming contaminated food. However, you can also get infected by handling reptiles, including turtles, lizards, snakes, and amphibians like frogs and salamanders, and then touching your mouth without properly washing your hands. Salmonella germs in the reptile's feces can contaminate anything they touch, including anything in the animal's environment, like aquariums and food dishes. Handling contaminated items can also spread the infection to humans.

Section O of the Department of Health - Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's [Health and Safety Guide for K-12 Schools in Washington](#) provides guidelines for keeping and handling live animals in classrooms. These guidelines should be followed whenever any animal is housed in the classroom. However, there are concerns specifically involving snakes and other reptiles in schools that need to be addressed.

- WSRMP recommends that school districts not purchase snakes for classroom use. Snake **ownership** incurs strict liability for any injury or loss associated with the ownership of snakes, regardless of due care and diligence exercised in controlling the snake.
- Staff/visitors requesting to bring their personal snake/reptile into the classroom should be informed in writing that they will be held strictly liable in the event of injury or loss of property.
- The district should have a process to approve all animals on campus.
- The staff member requesting the reptile/snake should outline in writing the following in their request:
 - Proposed reptile/snake specifications, including location, light requirements, enclosure size, power & temperature requirements, food needs, average lifespan, etc.
 - Proposed animal care plan, including who will be responsible for feeding and cleaning the enclosure, school closure care, and veterinary care.
 - Outline the educational benefit for the students and the potential risks.
- All poisonous snakes, including "defanged" snakes, should be prohibited.
- Obtain parental consent forms before allowing any reptile/snake in the school.
- Consider the appropriateness of elementary students attending live-feeding sessions. Additional informed consent signed by parents should be obtained.
- Keep reptiles away from children under five and people with weakened immune systems.
- Students should handle reptiles only with adult guidance, if at all. Obtain signed parental consent forms before allowing students to handle reptiles or snakes.
- Students are not allowed to nuzzle, lick, or kiss reptiles when they handle them.
- Students and staff should wash their hands and exposed body areas with hot water and soap immediately after handling or feeding reptiles and cleaning cages. Avoid hand-to-mouth contact when handling animals or enclosures.
- Reptiles and snakes must be kept in their living area; do not allow them to roam free. All snakes must be in locked cages comprising an impervious surface within a designated area that can be easily sanitized. Use an approved disinfectant to regularly clean and sanitize reptile cages and other living areas.
- Any live food source kept in the classroom should meet the same health department requirements pertaining to live animals in classrooms.
- Keep reptiles out of all food preparation or eating areas.

Additional information and resources may be found at:

[CDC Animals in Schools & Daycares](#)

[CDC Salmonella](#)

[PIJAC Herp Committee](#)

[PETA The Dangers of Bringing Reptiles and Amphibians into your Classroom](#)

For questions about recommendations or issues addressed in this article, please contact our Risk Services Department at 206-394-9737 or riskservices@wsrmp.com.