

The Public Health Agency of Canada advises of a potential health concern related to dwarf/pigmy or regular hamsters

The Public Health Agency of Canada is advising Canadians in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and northwestern Ontario who have purchased a dwarf/pigmy or regular hamster in the past three months of a potential health concern.

Ill hamsters from a pet distributor in Manitoba have tested positive for Type B tularemia. It is a rare and usually mild disease in humans that can be treated with antibiotics. In rare cases, some forms of tularemia can be fatal.

The purpose of this advisory is to ask people who have purchased a hamster in the past three months to contact their health care provider if both they and their hamster have experienced illness.

“We believe the risk to human health is low, but if people have sick hamsters and are feeling ill themselves, we want them to advise their health care provider,” explained Dr. David Butler-Jones, the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada.

Ill hamsters, along with other small mammals (chinchillas, guinea pigs, gerbils, degues) that were included in shipments with the hamsters, were sent to pet stores in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and northwestern Ontario. At present, there is no indication of illness in the other animals. The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, Alberta Health and Wellness, Saskatchewan Health, Manitoba Health, the Ontario Minister of Health and Long-term Care and the Public Health Agency of Canada are working together closely on this investigation.

Tularemia is a bacteria found naturally in wild animals, particularly rodents. Human tularemia disease is rare and is not known to spread from person to person.

Tularemia is usually transmitted by contact with infected animals or their cages/immediate environment. This means:

- being bitten or licked by the animal,
- handling or cleaning the animal, its toys, cage and feeding equipment,
- breathing in air contaminated with the bacteria, or
- eating or drinking contaminated food or water.

Symptoms of tularemia may include ulcers on the skin or mouth, swollen glands and painful lymph glands, sudden fever, chills, headache, diarrhoea, muscle aches, dry cough, progressive weakness, joint pain, sore throat and swollen and painful eyes. Symptoms usually appear three to five days after exposure to the bacteria but can take as long as 14 days to appear.

If your hamster appears sick or dies, and within 14 days you also feel ill, see your health care provider. Be sure to let your health care provider know why you think you may have been in contact with tularemia. Advise your health care provider to speak with your local or regional public health office.

Pet stores should closely monitor their hamsters and notify their local veterinarian if they observe illness and higher than usual mortality.

Handling sick/dead animals and their accessories

When handling sick or dead animals or items from their environment (cages, toys, dishes), wear gloves made of rubber, latex or other water-proof material. Commercially available dishwashing gloves that have no tears are adequate. Remember to wash your hands thoroughly with warm water and soap or an alcohol hand gel after removing your gloves and after every contact with the sick animal or its environment. If your hamster dies, you should double bag it and dispose of it in the garbage or bury it deep enough (1 metre) that it will not be dug up by other animals.

The cage and animal accessories should be washed in hot soapy water using any commercially available household disinfectant. Rinse the cage in a 10% bleach solution (one part household bleach, nine parts water). Let the cage air dry for at least 10 minutes. A 70% solution of alcohol can then be used to further clean the area and reduce the corrosive action of the bleach. Consult your pet store before using the cage for another animal.

Equipment, including cages and toys, can be disposed of in regular household waste. All the items should be cleaned using the procedure described above before disposal. When handling litter, if possible, wear a mask. Wrap contaminated litter in plastic prior to disposal. Do not attempt to disinfect the litter.

After handling animals, or after being licked or bitten by a household pet, be sure to always wash your hands thoroughly with warm water and soap or an alcohol gel. The same should be done after handling pet toys or cleaning bowls or cages used by animals. Hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of disease.

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