

# Study carried out into biological risks of eating reptiles

February 9 2010

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In the picture, a plate of iguanas. Credit: Marshall Astor (Creative Commons).

Reptiles are bred in captivity primarily for their skins, but some restaurants and population groups also want them for their meat. A study shows that eating these animals can have side effects that call into question the wisdom of eating this 'delicacy.'

Parasites, bacteria and viruses, and to a lesser extent contamination from heavy metals and residues of veterinary drugs-- eating reptile meat can cause several problems to health. This is the conclusion of a study published in the *International Journal of Food Microbiology*, which shows that people can catch certain diseases (trichinosis, pentastomiasis,

gnathostomiasis and sparganosis) by eating the meat of reptiles such as crocodiles, turtles, lizards or snakes.

"The clearest microbiological risk comes from the possible presence of [pathogenic bacteria](#), especially Salmonella, and also Shigella, *Escherichia coli*, *Yersinia enterocolitica*, Campylobacter, [Clostridium](#) and [Staphylococcus aureus](#), which can cause illnesses of varying degrees of severity," Simone Magnino, lead author of the study and a researcher for the World Health Organization (WHO), tells SINC.

This expert says the data about risks to public health are still inconclusive, since there is no comparative information about consuming this meat and the prevalence of pathogens. Also, there are few published research articles about cases of illness associated with consuming reptile meat.

"Although the majority of the information published about these risks is in relation to reptiles raised as domestic animals (pets), there are also publications relating to wild species or those bred in captivity", explains Magnino.

## **Meat should be frozen**

The experts advise people to freeze the meat, just as they would with other foods from animal sources, since this deactivates parasites. Industrial processing and proper cooking (not leaving the meat raw) can also kill off pathogens.

The Scientific Panel on Biological Risks of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) provides independent scientific advice on issues relating directly or indirectly to food security, including risks associated with eating reptile meat.

The objective of these risk evaluations is to supply the relevant bodies (European Commission, European Parliament, EU Council and member states) with a scientific basis in order to help them draw up legislation to guarantee consumer protection.

Some countries use turtles, crocodiles, snakes and lizards as a source of protein in the human food chain. Frozen imported [meat](#) from [crocodiles](#), caimans, iguanas and pythons can be found in the EU. These imports, which are on the rise, come mainly from South Africa, the United States and Zimbabwe, and go primarily to Belgium, France, Germany, Holland and the United Kingdom.

**More information:** Simone Magnino, Pierre Colin, Eduardo Dei-Cas, Mogens Madsen, Jim McLauchlin, Karsten Nöckler, Miguel Prieto Maradona, Eirini Tsigarida, Emmanuel Vanopdenbosch and Carlos Van Peteghem. "Biological risks associated with consumption of reptile products." International Journal of Food Microbiology 134 (2009) 163, September 2009.

Provided by FECYT - Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology

Citation: Study carried out into biological risks of eating reptiles (2010, February 9) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-biological-reptiles.html>

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