



## Second-hand goods: A guide for consumers

Second-hand goods are generally presented for sale in a good state of repair and cleanliness, but should be thoroughly cleaned before use.

### Recycling of second-hand goods

The sale of second-hand articles occurs on a relatively large scale throughout South Australia. Retail outlets for second-hand goods fall into two categories; commercial enterprises and charitable organisations.

Second hand goods can also be purchased at garage sales, car boot sales, fetes and on the internet.

Second-hand goods are often donated and are generally found to be in a good state of repair and cleanliness.

### Is there a risk to health?

There is a small risk of infection or infestation from second-hand clothing or bedding.

Bacterial organisms such as streptococci and staphylococci are very unlikely to survive on clothing or bedding in sufficient numbers and long enough to cause a health risk to the purchaser.

Parasites (including fungi) however, may survive for extended periods of time. While transmission of these organisms is also unlikely, some second-hand goods may result in a risk to health if they are not thoroughly cleaned before use.

### What are the risks?

#### Scabies

Scabies is an infectious skin condition caused by the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*. Transmission primarily occurs through

direct contact with an infested person and to a lesser extent contaminated clothing and bedding (scabies mites can survive for up to 4 days off the human host).

#### Body lice

The louse species *Pediculus humanis* feeds on human blood and lives between the skin and clothing of humans. Transmission can occur through infested clothing, bedding and furniture. Body lice are uncommon in Australia.

#### Pubic lice (crabs)

*Phthirus pubis* feed on human blood and are commonly found in areas of sparse, coarse hair such as pubic areas, eyebrows, beards. Sexual contact is the most common form of transmission, but sharing recently contaminated beds, bedding and clothing may also result in infestation.

#### Head lice

*Pediculus capitus* live and feed on the human head. Close head to head contact is the most common form of transmission, although infested items such as hair ties, hats and scarves may pose a low risk as head lice can survive off the human head for 1-2 days.

#### Bed bugs

*Cimex lectularius* or the common bed bug lives in cracks and crevices of beds and bedroom furniture and feeds on human blood. Bed bugs are able to survive for long periods of time without a blood meal (adult bugs for more than



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a year) and can be transported in furniture, bedding and clothing.

## **Tinea**

Tinea (ringworm/athlete's foot/jock itch) is a fungal infection of the skin, nails or hair which is highly contagious.

Tinea can be transmitted from direct skin-to-skin contact or via contaminated clothing, footwear and surfaces such as shower floors. Shed skin scales can remain infectious for prolonged periods in the environment.

## **Impetigo (school sores)**

Skin infection caused by staphylococcus or streptococcus bacteria, or both. Impetigo is highly contagious through skin to skin contact and to a far lesser extent by handling clothing or other contaminated items.

## **What do purchasers need to do?**

Many charitable organisations and second-hand dealers ensure that items are washed or clean before offering for sale to the public.

As the risk to health associated with second-hand goods is very low, thorough and hygienic cleaning is all that is required to eliminate the risk of transmission.

Most of the parasites/bacteria of concern can only survive away from the human host for a few days (except bed bugs and tinea) so contaminated items remain a risk for a very limited time.

Washing second-hand clothing and bedding in hot water (hotter than 60°C) and detergent kills these disease-causing organisms.

Items that cannot be washed such as toys, pillows and delicates can be dry cleaned, sealed in a plastic bag for five days or placed on high heat in a tumble dryer for 10 minutes.

## **What do I look for?**

Checking second-hand items thoroughly before purchase is a good idea.

Bed bugs, lice and their eggs and/or waste products may be evident in the seams and creases of second-hand goods (although they usually scurry away and hide when exposed to the light).

Examining the article will give you an indication of its general cleanliness and quality but not necessarily reveal a health risk.

Most of the parasites of concern are so tiny that they cannot be seen with the naked eye. For this reason it is important that all items are treated as potentially contaminated and washed before use.

Items that are grossly soiled or contaminated should be discarded.

## **Should goods be washed before sale?**

There are no specific laws in South Australia that require second-hand dealers to clean goods before they are offered for sale to the public.

It is common practice in many charitable organisations and second-hand stores to make items look clean, but the standard of cleaning practices may vary from store to store. Some stores wash all stock while others wash only items with noticeable marks or odour.

Store cleaning policy may also vary depending on the item in question, such as washing all socks when they come into the shop but giving shoes just a wipe over (exterior surface) if they look 'dirty'.

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## What about second-hand jewellery?

Although second-hand jewellery is often inserted into the body, it poses no more of a risk than clothing or bedding and requires the same standard of cleaning.

**Note:** Jewellery used in new body piercing must be sterile.

All second-hand jewellery items should be washed in warm water and detergent to remove any visible soiling, then rinsed in warm to hot running water before use.

## Further information

- Your local council Environmental Health Officer
- The Department of Health on 8226-7100 or go to our website:

[www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environ-health-index.htm](http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environ-health-index.htm)

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