

Reptiles- General Care

The “Cool Factor”

Reptiles include a diverse and fascinating variety of lizards, snakes, and turtles/tortoises. Be sure that you have done your homework before you buy your new reptile. Often the “coolest” reptile has the most exacting care requirements.

Temperature

Reptiles are poikilotherms- unable to maintain their body temperature (often referred to as cold-blooded). It is important to provide a proper temperature gradient for your pet to choose from. Veterinarians and biologists are not fond of hot rocks. Depending on the species- radiant heat in the form of heat lamps or heating elements, can provide a good heat source.

Knowing what temperature your pet should exist in also means being able to regularly measure the environmental temperature level. A stick-on aquarium thermometer is of little value. We want to know what the actual temperature is where the animal is staying. Buy an indoor/outdoor electronic thermometer (Radio Shack) and place the probe in areas where your pet stays. Adjust heat settings based in this accurate information. Remember, when you reptiles you must act like a biologist!

Lighting

Most reptiles require full-spectrum lighting, providing the vital UV-b spectrum. Most artificial lighting systems are over-rated and underused, resulting in adequate ultraviolet light. Even with an otherwise adequate diet and heat, bone and reproductive problems can result.

Take your reptile outside for direct sunlight. Be sure to house safely in appropriate wire cage or carrier (not glass or plexiglas). Studies have shown that 20 minutes of direct sunlight provide more benefit than a whole day of most artificial lighting

Diet

Commercial reptile chows are unproven and non-standardized. Unlike our bird patients, these products may not be the best approach to reptile nutrition however products continue to evolve.

Reptiles who normally eat at least animal matter- the prey food should be fed as whole animal to get the proper nutrition. Owners feeding rodents should be sure that purchased prey have been properly fed. Rodents raised on the typical seed

mix will provide poor nutrition to the reptile eating them. Rodents should be raised on Purina or Mazuri lab chow. Some retailers carry frozen rodents that have been raised this way by a national producer.

Insect-eating reptiles should not rely on just one kind of prey. For example crickets, particularly when not "gut loaded" are typically nutritionally imbalanced and only partially digestible.

For plant-eating reptiles, mineral imbalances are common. The best greens are collards, kale and mustard. North American fruits provide little nutritional benefit.

Bedding

A variety of products are promoted to place with your reptile. While many can contribute to problems (bacteria/fungal growth, skin disease, impactions), the most important feature is complete replacement of the product at least weekly. Newspapers are a practical alternative, if not as attractive.

Parasites

While more reptiles than ever are captive bred, parasitism in captive collections and from wild-caught specimens continues to be a problem. Be sure to bring a fresh fecal sample (in Zip-loc bag) for fecal analysis when your pet is examined.

Health Assessment

Reptiles are notorious for masking signs of illness for long periods of time.

Inadequate heat, lighting and/or nutrition can lead to a variety of other ailments, including respiratory, liver, kidney and heart conditions.

Post-purchase, periodic and sick reptile exams, bolstered by blood testing and a variety of other diagnostics can help recognize problems that need treating. Don't wait until your pet is very sick. Many seen by veterinarians have been sick for weeks to months, making diagnosis and treatment more important.

Salmonella

Much has been written about reptiles as *Salmonella* carriers. In some reptiles, such as water turtles and iguanas, *Salmonella* carriers are indeed quite common. Humans, particularly infants, elderly, and the immunosuppressed can contract serious, even fatal infections. Veterinarians can screen your pet for *Salmonella* and treat identified carriers but cannot currently guarantee that your pet is NOT a carrier. Common sense dictates thorough hand-washing after handling reptiles and before eating.