



A Compassionate Commitment to Quality Pet Care!

# DISEASES IN REPTILES REQUIRING VETERINARY ATTENTION

## METABOLIC BONE DISEASE

The most common disease among captive reptiles results from gross malnutrition. Most new reptile owners are often given improper nutritional advice from pet shops where the reptiles are purchased. Frequently, the owner feeds only lettuce and squash to the exclusion of other vegetables (lettuce is simply a water sponge devoid of nutrition). Some owners will also feed insects to herbivorous reptiles, while others will only feed vegetables to carnivorous ones. These problems are aggravated by the lack of calcium and Vitamin D<sub>3</sub> from little or no exposure to sunlight and improper or lack of vitamin/mineral supplementation. Unfortunately, some of these reptiles appear well-fed and chubby. Veterinary care is often not sought until they are in serious danger of dying.

**Symptoms:** Listlessness, swollen lower jaw, soft/rubbery lower jaw and face, difficulty eating, and markedly firm, swollen limbs (“Popeye legs”). Limbs and spine also fracture easily—this is often the main reason veterinary care is sought.

## PARALYSIS OF THE REAR LEGS

Vitamin B<sub>1</sub> deficiency results in paralysis of the rear legs and tail of lizards and turtles. Metabolic bone disease may also be a cause due to low dietary calcium. Treatment by injection of the necessary vitamins/minerals and a change to the proper diet is necessary.

## NOSE ABRASIONS

Repeated attempts to escape can result in scratches and abrasions to the nose and face. Lizards, snakes, and turtles tend to push and rub their noses along the sides of their enclosures, searching for a way out. Abrasion can result from either glass/plastic or wire enclosures. The constant irritation causes ulceration of the rostrum (nose and face) and serious (often permanent) deformities. Bacterial infection may also result.

Preventing this problem is difficult, but providing sufficient visual security helps to minimize this behavior. For lizards, artificial plants that provide adequate basking areas are also very helpful. For snakes, the cut-off bottom of a bucket with holes on each side as “doors” are great hiding places. A long and wide PVC tub is also ideal for snakes. In some cases, a dark plastic film can be attached to the lower 4 inches of the enclosure’s outer walls to limit visibility.

## THERMAL INJURIES (BURNS)

Serious burns often result from contact with improper heat sources within the enclosure. Exposed light bulbs and hot rocks are the common causes. Hot rocks are notorious for causing burns when their internal heat control fails and the rock’s temperature rises dramatically. Ultraviolet and incandescent lamps used for light and heat are best placed above the enclosure and out of reach of the reptile. Never place an incapacitated or ill reptile on a heat source such as a heating pad or hot rock.

**Symptoms:** Blackened skin, red skin, peeling scales over moist ulcers.

## BACTERIAL INFECTIONS

**Blister Disease:** Results from constant exposure to a damp, filthy environment. Blisters form on the underside of the body that develops into serious skin lesions (ulcers).

**Dry Gangrene:** Infections usually start on the tip of the tail or toes and progresses towards the body. These limbs turn dark grey, then black, and make break off. Improper sanitation is the cause.

**Mouth Rot:** Is a bacterial infection often associated with malnutrition and a weakened condition. Swelling, inflammation and the accumulation of pus in the mouth, difficulty eating and increased salivation are all signs of mouth rot. Force feeding the reptile is often necessary during treatment.

**Abscesses:** Result when bacteria settle in one or more places in the body and cause local swelling and the formation of pus. Reptile pus is not liquid but a thick, almost rubbery substance that resists draining. For this reason, abscesses are often removed surgically by opening the swelling and cleaning out the abscess material. More than one surgery may be necessary since some abscesses continue to fill until the infection is completely under control.

**Reptiles are often given antibiotics by injection to treat bacterial infections.** For many owners, learning how to give these injections is difficult due to squeamishness or fear. There is little you can do to hurt your reptile when giving an injection.

## PARASITES

Parasites are found externally (mites), within the gastrointestinal tract (worms, protozoa), and within the blood (malaria-type organisms). Reptiles suffering malnutrition or chronic bacterial infections are most likely to die due to parasites. Fecal, skin, and blood examinations will determine the type of parasite and dictate the appropriate drug to use for treatment.

## VIRAL INFECTIONS

Viral infections may be responsible for some illness in captive reptiles, but little is known about these disease agents. Continued research will increase our knowledge in the future.

## ORGAN FAILURE

Organ failure accompanies advancing age and may be the consequence of gout or severe bacterial infection. Diagnostic blood tests help pinpoint the affected organ(s).

**Symptoms:** Vary with the organ—weight loss, listlessness, loss of appetite, bloating, fluid accumulation in the abdomen, and death.

## BLADDER STONES

Minerals in the urine may precipitate and form stones within the urinary bladder. The abdomen may become enlarged if the stone becomes very large. Females may have difficulty passing eggs or not be able to pass eggs at all if large bladder stones are present. Radiographs (X-rays) may be necessary to confirm the presence of stones.

**Symptoms:** Listlessness, blood in dropping (may not always be present).

## EGG-BINDING

Egg-binding can be a life-threatening condition that occurs when the female cannot expel one or more eggs from the reproductive tract. Malnutrition (especially mineral imbalances), mummification of eggs, large or malformed eggs, bladder stones and certain diseases can cause egg-binding. Physical examination and radiographs are helpful in diagnosis. Surgery is often necessary to resolve the problem. Some can be spayed at the same time so future problems are eliminated.

## **BROKEN LIZARD TAILS AND TOES**

Fractures, dislocations, accidental amputation, and crushing of the tail is possible in captive lizards (especially those who are allowed to roam the house). Treatment depends on the nature and severity of the injury.

Toes are also very vulnerable to injury, especially when housed in screen or wire enclosures. It is easy for toes or toenails to be trapped within the wire mesh, resulting in fractures and torn nails. If the nails are too long, their toes may get broken just from the nails getting snagged on carpeting or fabric. Bleeding nails can be stopped with flour or cornstarch applied to the nail. Fractures and lacerations on the toes or feet of your lizard require veterinary care.