

7 ways to keep your herp healthy!

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7 Ways to Keep Your Reptile Healthy

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One of the primary goals of a responsible pet owner is to do everything they can to keep their pet healthy. However, exactly what it takes to do that can get a little fuzzy, especially with reptiles. Here are seven things that you can do to help make sure that your pet reptile enjoys optimum health in your care.

1) Keep Them at the Right Temperatures

Warm-blooded animals like humans have bodies that automatically stay at the temperature it needs to function properly. However, as cold-blooded animals, reptiles depend on their environment to provide the heat energy that their bodies need. Furthermore, each species of reptile has its own Preferred Optimum Temperature Range (POTR), or the range of temperatures that it needs in its environment to regulate its body temperature effectively.

At the high end of the POTR, you have basking temperature, which is the hottest temperature that a reptile needs to be able to access. At the low end of POTR, you have the cool zone temperature, which is important to provide so the reptile can cool down as needed.

To keep your reptile at the right temperatures, you don't only need to know what temperatures they need — you need to make sure that you are measuring temperature correctly. Digital probe thermometers and infrared thermometers (temperature guns) are your best bet for accurately measuring the temperatures in your enclosure. Analog gauges, LCD tape, and other devices are generally not reliable, especially for measuring basking temperature.

Although reptiles are dependent on the heat energy they gain via basking, it is not healthy for a reptile to spend most of its time basking. This can indicate that your basking temps are too low or that your reptile is sick. Generally speaking, reptiles should spend most of their time in the cooler areas of the enclosure, with only occasional trips to the basking area.

2) Keep Them at the Right Humidity

Every animal on Earth needs water, and part of meeting a reptile's water needs requires taking humidity into consideration. For reptiles, humidity plays a crucial role in respiratory health, shedding, and overall hydration.

As with temperature, different reptile species have different humidity needs based on the conditions of the native habitat. And again, as with temperature, it's important to provide a range of humidity levels within your reptile's enclosure. Humidity is naturally higher in the cool zone and lower in the basking area. It also tends to be lower in the higher regions of the enclosure and higher in the lower regions. This means that you should target the high end of your reptile's preferred humidity levels in the cool, low area of your enclosure.

Make sure you're measuring humidity with the right tools. Use a digital probe hygrometer or psychrometer — avoid relying on analog gauges, which are not very accurate. To get an idea of the highest humidity levels in the enclosure, take your reading in the cool zone, close to the substrate for terrestrial species and among the lowest vines/branches for arboreal species.

Keep in mind that humidity naturally rises at night and drops during the day. This is a natural cycle and should not be something to really worry about. As a general rule, pay greatest attention to humidity levels during the period when your reptile is awake. Also, don't obsess over keeping humidity the same 24/7 – this is unnatural and can cause illness. Pay more attention to the average humidity.

Most people increase humidity via misting. Pressure sprayers are great for routine misting, but if you have multiple enclosures, you may want to consider an automatic misting system to make things easier. Foggers can be used, but they should only be used with distilled water at night, as they can make reptiles sick or even dangerously increase ambient temps if used during the day, and tap water can clog the system. Also bear in mind that you will need to disinfect the fogger regularly to keep bacteria in check, which can make your reptile sick.

Actually needing to decrease humidity is rare, but if that's the case for you, it helps to increase air flow by adding a small fan or two to the enclosure.

3) Give Them the Right Lighting

Some reptiles can live without UVB, while others will die without it. However, using UVB lighting appropriately is best practice for housing all reptile species. When properly used, UVB lighting enables reptiles to produce exactly the amount of D3 that their bodies need (supplementary D3 often isn't enough), strengthens immune function, facilitates more successful reproduction, and other benefits. UVB bulbs also produce UVA light, which is important for reptiles' psychological wellbeing.

To use UVB properly, first you need to know the maximum amount of UVB that your reptile's species needs, which is measured in UVI. You can get this information from resources like the [Arcadia Lighting Guide](#) and the [UV Tool](#). This is the UVB strength that you will need in your reptile's basking area, which should be closest to the UVB lamp.

Once you have this information, you need to choose a UVB bulb and fixture. Consider the bulb's manufacturer as well as its strength rating, type of bulb, distance between the bulb and reptile, the presence of mesh, and what type of fixture will be housing the bulb.

- Arcadia and Zoo Med have the best UVB bulbs in the US.
- Mesh obstruction reduces UVB output by 30-40%.
- UVB radiation gets weaker further away from its source.
- Using a fluorescent lamp fixture without a reflector wastes ~50% of UVB output.
- T5 HO UVB bulbs are stronger than T8 bulbs.
- UVB bulbs must be replaced every 12 months to maintain performance.

It's usually helpful to read the instructions for use included with the bulbs. If at all possible, investing in a Solarmeter 6.5 (which measures UVB output) is strongly recommended.

Aside from UVB, many diurnal species benefit from additional 6500K full-spectrum daylight lighting, whether LED or T5 HO fluorescent. The bright light is good for their mental health and has been observed to stimulate activity and appetite.

Nighttime lighting (such as red bulbs) is unnecessary. Nocturnal reptiles can see just fine without the help, and nighttime lighting may interfere with reptiles' circadian rhythm regardless of when they are awake.

4) Pay Attention to Nutrition

Different reptile species need to eat different kinds of food in order to get the nutrients that their bodies need in a way that they can digest. Generally speaking, there are four primary types:

- Herbivores — eat primarily plants.
- Insectivores — eat primarily insects.

- Carnivores — eat primarily flesh from whole prey, as well as eggs.
- Omnivores — eat both plant and animal matter. Ratio of plant- to animal-based food in the diet varies from species to species.

Familiarize yourself with the kind of food that your reptile's species eats, then strive to provide as much variety within that category as possible. Variety is the key to balanced nutrition, whether you have a snake or tortoise.

Dietary supplements are an essential part of a captive reptile's diet, but they must be used appropriately. Generally speaking, you will need a calcium powder supplement and a multivitamin powder supplement.

- Calcium: If UVB is provided, use a calcium powder with low levels of D3 or none at all. If UVB is not provided, use a calcium powder with high levels of D3. Calcium powder should be dusted on insects and incomplete protein sources like meat or de-shelled eggs. Generally it shouldn't be dusted on salads unless you are caring for an herbivore.
- Multivitamin: These supplements are typically very concentrated, so only a small amount is necessary. Dose according to known best practice for your reptile's species, or when in doubt, according to the product label.

Top reptile supplements in the US include those manufactured by Arcadia, Repashy, and Sticky Tongue Farms.

5) Give Them Opportunities to Exercise

Physical fitness is correlated with good health. Physically-fit reptiles without excessive amounts of body fat have better muscle tone, better organ function, and are better able to thermoregulate, which provides associated health benefits. One of the best ways to make sure your reptile is getting enough exercise is to provide a large enough enclosure for them to be able to stretch out and run/slither/climb around as desired. Reptiles have large territories in the wild — much larger than even generous enclosures in captivity — so there's no such thing as an enclosure that is "too big", only an enclosure that hasn't been set up properly.

Of course, a huge enclosure with nothing inside of it is boring. Encourage your reptile to move around and utilize the space with environmental enrichment items such as a deep, burrowable substrate layer, ledges, textured backgrounds, lattices, branches, vines, etc. The idea is to encourage your reptile to exercise natural behaviors, so study up on what your reptile does in the wild (climb, dig, etc.) and set up its enclosure in a way that facilitates those behaviors.

Finally, if your reptile is comfortable with it, handling can be a good way to present your reptile with unique exercise and enrichment opportunities. Don't be afraid to get creative, but keep it within the species' limits, and make sure that the reptile is appropriately supervised and is not being stressed by the activity.

6) Practice Good Hygiene

This one should be a no-brainer. Practicing good hygiene is essential to reducing the pathogens present in your reptile's environment, and therefore helps keep your reptile healthy. Here are some basic tips to make part of your routine:

- Provide fresh water daily.
- Keep the water and food bowls clean, and disinfect weekly.
- Wash or sanitize your hands before and after handling.
- Spot-clean to remove feces, urate, contaminated substrate, and uneaten food daily.
- Replace non-bioactive substrate every 3 months or more frequently if necessary.
- Perform regular, appropriate maintenance on bioactive substrates.
- Sterilize new décor items before adding them to an enclosure.
- Quarantine new reptiles, preferably in a separate room from others.

7) Take Them to the Vet

Of course, how can you stay healthy if you don't see a doctor regularly? Make a habit of bringing your pet reptile to the vet once or twice a year for routine examination and potential deworming — one way to do this is to schedule the next visit after each appointment. It's also important to bring your reptile to the vet whenever you suspect that something's wrong. Don't risk your reptile's health by asking non-experts online.

If money is a concern, resources like pet insurance and CareCredit can make vet bills more manageable.

Conclusion

Most health complaints in pet reptiles can be traced to husbandry issues. While it's still important to take your pet to an experienced reptile veterinarian for examination if you suspect that something is wrong, double-checking your husbandry parameters and making corrections where needed is one of the best ways to ensure long-term health for your reptile.

The Dude Abides