

# 24 Common Signs of Illness in Herps & What to Do About It



***The information in this article is not intended to replace professional veterinary advice. \****

Just like humans and cats and dogs need annual health exams as part of routine care, it's also best practice to take your pet herp to the vet every year. However, you should also prepare for the possibility of your pet getting sick or hurt at some point. With appropriate care, reptiles are capable of living 15-20 years — and in some cases, longer! In other words, the statistical likelihood that they will need medical care at some point in their lifespan is quite high.

In this article, we're going to outline some of the most common signs of illness in reptiles and amphibians, and how to determine where veterinary help is needed. This is also a good reference for when you're looking to buy a herp, as you don't want to buy a sick animal that may not survive its first month with you, and you definitely don't want to support a business that sells sick animals.

Reminder: Make sure your pet reptile or amphibian undergoes quarantine and is completely healthy before introducing it to a bioactive setup!

### Physical Signs of Illness in Herps

- Audible breathing
- Open-mouth breathing
- Cloudy eyes
- Discharge from the eyes/mouth/nose
- Curved/otherwise deformed limbs or tail
- Drastic weight loss (>10%)
- Lumps/swelling
- Unusually red or pale gums
- Blackening or other discoloration
- Visible parasites: mites, ticks, worms in stool
- Liquid stool (diarrhea)
- Discolored urate
- Blood in stool/urate

### Behavioral Signs of Illness in Herps

The tricky thing with animals, and especially herps, is that they're generally very good at hiding when they're not feeling well. This is an evolutionary defense mechanism that helps prevent them from getting singled out by predators when they're feeling a bit under the weather. So if your pet's symptoms have gotten to the point where you, a human, can notice a difference in your pet, chances are that your pet is already feeling really lousy.

- Loss of appetite
- Regurgitation (vomiting)
- Lethargy (unusual laziness)
- Twitching
- Limping
- Loss of ability to use a limb
- Trouble moving
- Inability to defecate (straining)
- Unusually aggressive change in personality
- Unusually passive change in personality
- Species-specific indicators of distress (ex: color change)

With behavioral signs of illness, especially with vague symptoms like appetite loss or lethargy, it's a good idea to rule out seasonal causes (ex: breeding season, brumation) or a cause from a deficiency in your husbandry. Reading from an up-to-date, qualified source on reptile care, such as [ReptiFiles.com](https://reptifiles.com), or talking to an experienced keeper of the same species, can help with the latter.

### When Do You Call the Vet?

Some symptoms aren't very urgent. You can keep an eye on it, and then if it sticks around, you can call the vet and book an appointment for an examination and diagnosis. However, other symptoms require

attention ASAP. In some cases, you may need to see an emergency vet, which is the animal equivalent of the ER.

**Supervise closely, and if it doesn't change or worsens, call the vet:**

- Loss of appetite
- Regurgitation (vomiting)
- Liquid stool (diarrhea)
- Lethargy (unusual laziness)
- Twitching
- Limping
- Loss of ability to use a limb
- Trouble moving
- Inability to defecate (straining)
- Unusually aggressive change in personality
- Unusually passive change in personality
- Species-specific indicators of distress (ex: color change)

**Make an appointment within the next week:**

- Audible breathing
- Open-mouth breathing
- Cloudy eyes
- Discharge from the eyes/mouth/nose
- Curved/otherwise deformed limbs or tail (new)
- Drastic weight loss
- Blackening or other discoloration
- Visible parasites: mites, ticks, worms in stool

**Call the vet today:**

- Unusually reddened or pale gums
- Unnatural lumps/swelling
- Blackening or other discoloration
- Blood in stool/urate
- Burn injury
- Suspected or obvious broken bone
- Large open wound
- Prolapse (tissue stuck outside of cloaca)
- Seizure/thrashing
- If you're otherwise worried

## Conclusion

If you're worried about your herp's health and the symptoms are minor, it's okay to ask experienced reptile owners for their input. However, if the symptoms are more severe, don't waste time by asking the internet about it — talk to an experienced reptile vet first!! You can find a reputable reptile vet near

you on the list of [Bio Dude's Reptile Vets and AZA Affiliates](#) or, if that doesn't work, use the [ARAV's Find a Vet tool](#).

You may find the idea of seeking veterinary help prohibitive, as vets can be expensive (fortunately, not as expensive as attempting to see a human doctor without insurance in the United States!), and you'd probably prefer to keep that money in your pocket. However, keep in mind that part of taking on a pet is accepting responsibility for their health and safeguarding that health to the best of your ability. You might even need to drive a couple of hours to make sure your pet sees a vet who actually has experience in successfully treating reptiles/amphibians, rather than one who sees them in theory but actually specializes in dogs/cats. Keep a small savings account or cash stash for handling your pet's veterinary expenses, or if that's not a possibility for you, you can sign up for a [CareCredit card](#) to pay off these expenses over time.

You may be tempted to try to self-treat your herp's symptoms first, and some people on the internet may even encourage you to go this route. To be fair, there *are* some things that fall under the "basic first aid" umbrella and don't require veterinary attention, such as a stuck shed, small wounds, tail loss, and parasitic mites. Sometimes minor symptoms may also resolve on their own, such as loud breathing caused by an impending shed.

However, at the end of the day, you are not an exotic animal healthcare professional, and you may very well do more harm than good for your pet, especially if self-treating involves dosing medication! DO NOT attempt to self-treat any of the symptoms or conditions listed under "call the vet today".

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