

Dehydration in reptiles - How to prevent it and keep them hydrated appropriately

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Signs of Dehydration in Reptiles & What to Do About It

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

Earth is unique for many reasons, but one of the biggest reasons is the fact that our planet has water. Water is generally regarded as the key to life itself. Where there is no water, there can be no life — and that goes for reptile terrariums just as much as it does for planets. When there's not enough water, or the water is provided in a way that is not appropriate for your pet reptile, the reptile becomes dehydrated.

Dehydration has many negative effects on reptiles' health and wellbeing:

- Decreases organ function

- Impairs skin health and the shedding process
- Decreases digestive motility
- Diminishes the body's ability to remove metabolic wastes
- May affect assimilation of water-soluble vitamins
- Decreases appetite
- Decreases activity

Even minor dehydration (hypohydration) negatively affects a reptile's health. But chronic dehydration is likely to result in severe health problems such as impaction, gout, and kidney failure.

Signs of Dehydration in Reptiles

Although symptoms can vary between species, here are some general signs and symptoms of dehydration in reptiles:

- Wrinkled and/or saggy skin
- Dented/cracked scales
- Trouble shedding
- Loss of skin elasticity
- Sunken eyes
- Yellow/orange urate
- Loss of appetite
- Lethargy
- Dull color
- Unusually aggressive behavior
- Weakness
- General "stress"

Some reptiles endure dehydration better than others. Arid species, for example, do better than tropical species because they evolved to survive through near-constant water scarcity. However, just because they cope with dehydration better does not mean that they don't need moisture in their environment. This also means it is extra important to pay attention to your reptile's husbandry and take measures to prevent dehydration from happening in the first place.

How to Rehydrate a Dehydrated Reptile

If you recognize one or more of the above symptoms in your reptile, it's possible that they are dehydrated.

The first thing you need to do is address the immediate problem by re-hydrating your reptile. The appropriate action will vary depending on what type of reptile you have and the severity of the symptoms.

For mild symptoms, fixing its husbandry will usually solve the problem, which is addressed in the next section.

For moderate symptoms, your reptile may need some special care before it perks back up. For example, if you have an arboreal gecko, misting the enclosure is likely to help. If you have a tortoise, give it a soak in shallow water. If you have a bearded dragon or leopard gecko, drop some water onto its nose with a dropper for it to lick. If you have a reptile with stuck shed, create a humidity chamber to help loosen the old skin.

If your reptile does not respond to these initial measures, or exhibits severe symptoms, you need to make an appointment with an experienced reptile veterinarian. For some reptiles, like chameleons, dehydration can quickly turn deadly. Your reptile may require a saline injection or other treatment. In some cases, dehydration is a symptom of a larger health problem.

How to Keep Your Reptile Hydrated

One of the best ways you can support your reptile's health is by making sure that they are always well-hydrated. There are many ways that a reptile can become dehydrated, so it's your job too.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Are the humidity levels in the enclosure appropriate for the species?
- Are you measuring humidity correctly?
- Does the substrate support appropriate levels of humidity in the enclosure?
- Does it have access to an area of higher humidity (ex: humid hide/burrow)?
- Does it have access to clean, fresh drinking water at all times?
- Does it have access to significantly cooler areas where it can cool down as needed?
- Is the basking temperature appropriately high?
- Is its food well-hydrated?

If you answered "no" to any of the above questions, here are some ways you can fix the problem and encourage healthier hydration in your reptile:

- Pay attention to average humidity levels with at least one digital probe hygrometer.
- Mist the enclosure more often/heavily.
- Use a cool mist fogger at night or for a short period in the early morning.
- Pour water into the substrate on a regular basis.
- Use a deeper substrate layer.
- Switch to a more moisture-retentive substrate.
- Soak greens before offering to increase their water content.
- Make sure that feeder insects are well-hydrated as well as well-fed.
- Dip feeder rodents in water before offering (if your snake will take them wet).

- If you use a powder- or pellet-based diet, moisten it appropriately before offering. Avoid using dried insects.
- Offer fresh food whenever possible.
- Install a dripper over a drinking surface.
- Provide a wall-mounted water bowl for arboreal species.
- Refresh drinking water whenever it gets soiled, and scrub the bowl at least once a week with disinfectant.
- Add an air stone to the water bowl to draw their attention with bubbles.
- Add live plants to the enclosure.
- Switch to bioactive.

It's also important to hydrate your reptile the way that it recognizes water – not all reptiles drink from bowls. Some prefer to drink from droplets that accumulate on foliage and the walls of their enclosure (ex: arboreal geckos, chameleons, anoles). Some soak in large water bowls (ex: tortoises, many snakes). Some get it primarily from their food (ex: uromastix, desert iguanas). Some are semi-aquatic and require a large pool of water (pond sliders, Chinese water dragons, basilisks). And for many, it's a combination – they'll take water however they can get it.

Healthy hydration varies from species to species. For example, the high humidity levels required to keep a mossy leaf-tailed gecko healthy are likely to make a leopard gecko sick. And while regular soaking works well for desert tortoises, it has no effect on bearded dragons.

It is a reptile owner's responsibility to make sure that their pet stays adequately hydrated. Do whatever you need to do to make that happen!

References

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