

# CARE ♦ PETS

Animal Hospital & Wellness Center

*The Best Care For Your Companion*

## Reptile Care

Each species of reptile has specific care requirements. This handout does not describe the care of individual species, but general things to consider for every reptile.

### Cage

- Size – It is truly important to purchase a cage large enough for your new pet. This will allow appropriate exercise, room to thermo regulate (adjust their body temperature), and minimize stress.
- Shape – Choose a cage that is designed with your pet in mind. For instance, a lizard that spends most of its time in the trees should have a cage that is taller than it is wide allowing room to climb. A reptile that spends most of its time on the ground would benefit more from a cage that is wider than it is tall allowing room to move around on the floor.
- Material – Cages may be made from glass, plastic, or mesh. Glass is the most common. It provides for better control of humidity and temperature. Plastic is similar to glass, however it is not a good option for species that require high temperatures as it will melt under heat lamps and light sources. Mesh provides excellent ventilation, but it can be hard to keep temperature and humidity at high levels. Therefore it is best used for species that require moderate temperature and humidity.

### Lighting

- Heat sources – Heat sources should consist of heat lamps or ceramic heat emitters above the cage. Heating pads placed below the cage may also be used. If used there should be an adequate layer of substrate on the floor of the cage, so that the animal does not come in direct contact with the heat source. **Heat rocks should never be used!** They are often sold in pet stores and do look cool, however they can cause severe and often deadly burns.
- UVA/UVB – UV lighting is vital in the metabolism of many species. It aids in the conversion of vitamin D to vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, which is essential for calcium metabolism and proper bone health. UV lighting comes in several different forms, be sure to purchase the one appropriate for your pet. Keep in mind that the UV spectrum of

# CARE ♦ PETS

Animal Hospital & Wellness Center

*The Best Care For Your Companion*

the bulb will only last for 6 months. Therefore it is recommended that you change your bulb every 6 months, even if it is not burned out.

## **Temperature**

- POTZ – Each species has its own Preferred Optimal Temperature Zone (POTZ), this is the range of environmental temperatures that it needs to survive. Since reptiles are ectothermic, they rely on the environment to regulate their body temperature. In order to regulate their temperature appropriately, they need a warm basking area and a cooler resting area. One end of the cage should have a warm basking area at the upper end of the POTZ and the other end should have a cooler area toward the lower end of the POTZ. Place a small thermometer in the warm area and the cooler area and monitor the temperatures daily.

## **Humidity**

- Desert – Desert animals require low humidity. This often occurs naturally in your reptile's cage due to the heat sources. However, the humidity should still be monitored with a hygrometer (humidity gauge) to assure it is in the proper range.
- Tropical – Tropical animals will require a high humidity. This can be hard to achieve in captivity. A combination of misting, waterfalls, drippers, and substrate can be used to achieve the appropriate humidity. Again, it is important to use a humidity gauge to monitor the humidity range.

## **Feeding**

- Nutrition is a vital part of keeping your reptile healthy. While many reptiles will survive for some time on a marginal quality diet, they need high quality sources of the appropriate foods to reach their full potential and survive long term. Therefore, it is essential to thoroughly research the species you choose and provide the proper diet.
- It is a good practice to feed your reptiles in a separate feeding container instead of their living quarters. This provides several benefits. It keeps them from accidentally eating their substrate, which can cause intestinal obstructions. It allows you to effectively monitor your pet's food intake and easily remove any leftovers. Removing leftover insects and rodents will reduce the amount of stress and prevent the insects or rodents from injuring a resting pet.
- Types of foods:

# CARE ♦ PETS

Animal Hospital & Wellness Center

*The Best Care For Your Companion*

- Insects – Commercially available insects are typically safer than wild caught insects, because they have not been exposed to pesticides or fertilizers. Crickets are the most commonly used insects for reptile diets. They are readily available for purchase and easy to maintain. You must “gut-load” the crickets before feeding them to your reptile. Gut-loading involves feeding the crickets a commercially available cricket diet. This step is essential. Otherwise you would be feeding your reptile an empty shell with very little nutritional value. You should also “dust” your crickets with a commercially available calcium supplement. Simply place one meal’s worth of crickets in a small paper bag or plastic cup, add a small amount of calcium supplement, and gently shake them before feeding them to your reptile. There are other types of insects available such as: fruit flies, wax worms, and mealworms. These are typically used as a treat to add variety to your pet’s diet.
- Greens – Herbivorous reptiles require high quality greens and vegetables. Most lettuces are inadequate. Spring mixes of dark green and red salad or anything with greens in the name (mustard greens, collard greens, etc.) are good sources of nutrition. Spinach and kale can be used sparingly in your pet’s salad. They do provide nutrition, but can cause severe side effects if used too much. It is also important to provide vegetables as well. Use a variety of veggies cut into small enough pieces for your pet. The actual percentage of greens and veggies needed is different for each species.
- Rodents – Rodents can be purchased live or frozen in a variety of sizes. Choose the size appropriate for your reptile. Prey items should be dead before they are offered to your pet. Yes, wild reptiles eat live prey. However, wild animals are not stuck in a small glass enclosure with their prey for extended periods of time. Many reptiles have been seriously injured by live mice and rats left in their enclosures. If you choose to feed live prey, you must closely supervise the feeding process. Frozen prey items are typically the best option for captive reptiles. Frozen prey items are pre-killed, can be purchased in bulk, and thawed out as necessary.
- Supplements – Reptiles that eat whole prey items (mice and rats) rarely need supplementation with calcium or vitamins. Reptiles that eat plants or

# CARE ♦ PETS

Animal Hospital & Wellness Center

*The Best Care For Your Companion*

insects will need supplementation with calcium and a multi-vitamin. The powdered forms of these supplements are easiest to use. They can be sprinkled directly on salads or dusted onto insects. Amount and frequency is based on the size, age, and species of reptile.

## **Health Care**

- Wellness – Routine wellness screening by a veterinarian is important for reptiles. Wellness screening helps detect husbandry problems, dietary issues, and disease processes before they turn into life threatening problems. Unfortunately many reptiles are very sick before they ever see a veterinarian and may even be sick before you purchase them.
- Diseases – If you suspect an illness in your reptile, you should have your pet seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Reptiles are susceptible to a wide variety of diseases. Major categories of disease include: nutritional, stress related, and infectious.
  - Nutritional diseases like metabolic bone disease and gout are preventable by providing the appropriate diet for your pet. There are established guidelines for most of the common reptiles in the pet trade. However, some of the newer species may not have specific guidelines. These species are not good candidates for beginners and should be left to the experienced reptile handler.
  - Stress related diseases are typically due to inadequate husbandry or nutrition. This includes diseases like difficulty shedding, thermal burns, mouth infections, egg-binding, and prey-inflicted injuries. All captive reptiles are under a certain amount of stress based on the fact they are wild animals and have not been truly domesticated. However, every effort should be made to minimize the stress level by providing appropriate husbandry, nutrition, and handling.
  - Infectious diseases vary by the different types of reptile but generally include bacteria, viruses, and parasites. These diseases are typically transmitted by contact with other animals, but may also be contracted from contaminated food or bedding. These diseases are more common in breeding facilities or large collections; however they can still be seen in individually house reptiles.