

## Basic Reptile Health

There is no single factor that will keep a captive reptile healthy. Internally and externally they must be as healthy as possible to give them the best chance of survival. Though they may not be totally free of bacteria, parasites or minor infections, if the animal is in good condition, it will be able to exercise control over them so that they don't interfere with normal body function.

So what do you look for when buying a reptile? Can you guarantee the reptile you select is as healthy an animal as you can possibly get? No you can't! There are no guarantees. But there are things you can look out for to at least give you and your future charge a sporting chance.

The skin of the animal must look right for its species, well rounded and filled out with no signs of dehydration. The skin colour must be bright and clear. The animal should behave normally for its species; it should be alert to its surroundings. Ask as many



questions as you feel you need to e.g. is it actively thermoregulating; sloughing (shedding); eating; drinking and defecating regularly and as it should do? Don't be frightened to probe the seller/dealer with questions. A reptile, as with any other 'pet', can be expensive to buy and even more expensive to maintain!

You should have already researched your animal and be ready with the correct facilities for its husbandry. These preparations are of the greatest importance, must not be skimped or hurried and will include, but are not necessarily confined to:

- An enclosure of the proper size and construction
- Suitable and appropriate furnishings where required
- Suitable lighting (UVB etc.) and heat
- Correct food type and size
- Maintenance equipment (i.e. cleaning fluids etc.)

Failure to provide these most basic of reptile requirements can lead to severe health problems and stress. The animal will exhibit both marked physical and behavioural changes that any keeper who monitors their animal properly will note immediately. Check for



changes such as skin folds that could indicate dehydration, or differences in colour. Watch out for changes to feeding habits. What about the faeces? Has that changed in any way? Is it behaving as it should? Watch out for unusually aggressive behaviour. Is more than one animal housed together? You need to monitor both of them closely to see if there is any exhibited aggression between them. Make certain that they are all feeding, drinking and sleeping as they should. Sloughing is a good indicator that something might be wrong particularly when the pattern of an animals' shedding changes. Examine the sloughed skin for any signs that there may be a problem. You should also carefully check the animal for any possible injuries, swellings or lumps on a regular basis.

Stress as well as the direct effects of environmental problems (cage size, orientation, heating, lighting, feeding, humidity, etc.) can all lead to illness. Stress can suppress the animals' immune function and its body may not be able to fight off infection or control internal parasites. The more stress the animal suffers or the longer that it continues, will cause the animal to weaken further.

## Feeding

Feeding problems are one of the main topics that new hobbyists seek advice on. With reptiles these difficulties can be caused due to several reasons that include:

- ❖ new surroundings for the reptile
- ❖ temperatures are too hot or too cold
- ❖ inappropriate environment
- ❖ improper lighting / no UVB

- ❖ enclosure too small / large
- ❖ water too shallow for aquatic reptiles
- ❖ no hide boxes
- ❖ feeding at wrong time
- ❖ prey not thoroughly defrosted
- ❖ prey not thoroughly warmed to body temperature
- ❖ animal sick or injured
- ❖ constipation
- ❖ impaction of foreign object
- ❖ parasitised
- ❖ getting ready to shed



The list is far from exhaustive. So, what do you do if your reptile isn't feeding? First of all, ensure that all the above have been taken into account and addressed if you have any concerns with any item. If everything is as it should be then you will need to

investigate further. It could be that a trip to an experienced herpetologist/hobbyist could be in order, or perhaps even a visit to a veterinarian may be necessary. The bottom line is if there is a feeding problem that cannot be solved by covering the list given above, you probably need help. Don't leave anything to chance.

You will no doubt hear of reptiles being 'force fed'. This is not always the answer to feeding problems and is a last resort. **Please...do not attempt to force feed your animal.** Leave it to experienced keepers. Get expert advice from the moment you believe feeding may be an issue with your animal.

Strangely, reptiles take a long time to die due to their cold-bloodedness. They will conserve energy thereby maintaining basic body functions for a long time. This is as true in captivity as it is in the wild. Reduced activity and increased hiding are

associated with these attempts to conserve energy, that is a common reaction to slow starvation, where energy is being put into healing,

## Recap

The need for protracted and thorough preparation cannot be overstated. Have everything you need completely set up at home before getting your reptile. Don't start setting up a tank, placing 'furniture', laying substrate and sorting out the temperatures with the animal waiting in the wings or sat in the enclosure totally stressed. Have everything ready and this means thorough research before buying. **DON'T BUY ON IMPULSE!**

Keep everything associated with your reptile scrupulously clean, both for the sake of your reptile and very importantly, for your own health and safety. By following a few basic and very simple cleaning procedures, you will eliminate the majority of difficulties that you could possibly be faced with in terms of disease...reptile AND human!

And finally just to recap. In the first instance, buying the healthiest looking animal you can find...the one that is obviously being properly cared for and has been provided with the correct environmental conditions by the seller/dealer...will give you the best possible chance of success in your chosen hobby. Don't be tempted to pick the first animal you see, or the one that looks as though it is in need of rescue. You will do no more than buy yourself an unnecessary burden that will probably end in misery for you AND the reptile.



Take advice and go looking for your animal armed with all the knowledge that your extensive research has given you and **don't be distracted**. You can look forward to a fascinating and rewarding hobby for many years to come.