

# Reptile Critical Care and Common Emergencies



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## KEYWORDS

• Emergency • Reptile • Monitoring • Fluid therapy • Euthanasia

## KEY POINTS

- The physical examination and methods of monitoring a critical patient are vital when providing supportive care in an emergency situation and will aid in diagnosis and targeted treatment.
- Common emergency presentations for review include acute pathologic changes and illness sustained from chronic husbandry deficiencies and dietary insufficiency.
- In the case of patients with guarded to poor prognoses, humane and compassionate euthanasia may be required.

## INTRODUCTION

Reptile emergencies are an important part of exotic animal critical care, both true emergencies and those perceived as emergencies by owners. Although most cases in later discussion are typically chronic in nature, they may present acutely, such as a reptile with poor husbandry presenting for a pathologic fracture, egg binding, or respiratory issues.<sup>1</sup> When approaching a reptile emergency, keep in mind that whatever underlying medical issue causing the clinical signs has taken a long time to occur, and an immediate fix is unlikely to be possible.

## PHYSICAL EXAMINATION AND MONITORING

The physical examination of a reptile is a valuable tool in diagnosing and treating medical emergencies. The physical examination of a reptile should include, but is not limited to the following:

- Assessment of mentation and response to handling/awareness of surroundings
- Musculoskeletal/neurologic examination, including observation of posture:
  - Can the lizard or chelonian hold its entire body off of the examination table when ambulating? Assess “knuckling” (conscious proprioception) response

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of all 4 limbs. When placed in dorsal recumbency, lizards should attempt to right themselves head first. Chelonians will often move their head and legs all together to attempt righting; this is an excellent time to assess limb movement.

- Some lizards (like iguanas) have a menace response that can be assessed.<sup>2</sup>
- Can the snake right itself if placed in dorsal recumbency? Does the snake have a jerky motion when moving through substrate or across the examination table?<sup>2</sup>
  - NOTE: when performing a reptile neurologic examination, be aware that the patient will become increasingly less responsive the longer the examination continues. Less responsiveness is not necessarily an indication of neurologic dysfunction.
- Hydration: Look for sunken eyes, a skin tent, or increased creasing when a snake curls up (creasing in snake skin can also occur in cases of weight loss). On oral examination, dehydrated reptiles may also exhibit “ropy” saliva.
- Palpation:
  - With large lizards, like iguanas, rectal examinations should be performed in order to assess the kidneys.
  - Full-body palpation is possible with snakes. Diagrams of snake anatomy demonstrate the relative locations of organs within the coelom.<sup>3</sup>
  - The prefomoral fossa should be palpated in chelonians. Often if the animal is reproductively active, you can palpate follicles or eggs; enlarged organs may also be palpable. Be careful when palpating to prevent crushed fingers when the leg is forcefully withdrawn.
- Auscultation
  - Auscultation can be challenging in the reptilian patient; however, the heart can be auscultated in most lizard patients, as can the lungs in most reptile species. Moist gauze can be used as an aid by decreasing airspace between scales when placed between the stethoscope and skin.
  - A Doppler unit may also be used to take a heart rate during a physical examination and monitor an anesthetized or debilitated reptile.<sup>4</sup> The probe can be placed over the heart in snakes. In lizards, the heart can usually be detected with a Doppler when placed in the axillary region aiming toward the chest, or directly over the heart in the cranial coelom.<sup>5</sup> Keep in mind species variations; monitor lizard hearts are more caudally located than other lizard species. With lizards and chelonians, the carotid can be monitored using a probe in the cervical region. With chelonians, angling a cervically placed probe toward midline will allow for cardiac monitoring.

Reptiles often present with low body temperatures on emergency, which may affect the physical examination findings. It is ideal to reassess the patient after restoring the appropriate body temperature in order to get the most accurate information.

## DIAGNOSTICS

Different diagnostics that will help to target treatment with reptile patients are largely similar to mammalian and avian patients, though reptile venipuncture can be challenging in some species (**Table 1**). These diagnostics include the following:

1. Complete blood count (CBC): reptile red blood cells contain a nucleus, requiring manual evaluation of blood slides. In-house estimated white blood cell counts may be performed in emergency cases, but ideally, samples should be sent to a laboratory with personnel comfortable with evaluating a reptile hemogram.

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