

Tarantula and Hermit Crab Emergency Care



Cynthia Marnell, BS, BVMS

KEYWORDS

- Tarantulas • Fluid therapy • Biology • Hermit crabs • Diagnostics • Trauma
- Euthanasia • Husbandry

KEY POINTS

- Tarantulas and hermit crabs must have proper substrates, temperatures, humidity, diet, hygiene, and minimal handling to have the best health and longevity.
- Safe handling and physical examination are the first steps in approaching any medical condition in these species.
- Dehydration and blood loss can be treated with fluid therapy, which consists of both oral and injectable fluid treatment, and tissue glue if needed.
- Diagnostics can be done on these species; however, practitioners are limited by lack of diagnostic laboratories, normal values, and standardized tests.
- Euthanasia may be one of the best ways to help these pets, if their condition is advanced or if they are suffering.



Video content accompanies this article at <http://www.vetexotic.theclinics.com>

INTRODUCTION

Many emergency practitioners are willing to examine and treat some exotic pet species, such as birds, reptiles, amphibians, rabbits, rodents, hedgehogs, and sugar gliders. However, there are hundreds of other species also in need of emergency care. These species are not necessarily uncommon; they may be considered “classic” children’s pets. Tarantulas and hermit crabs are “classic pets” from the 1970s and 1980s. It was not uncommon for one to run across these species in a small neighborhood pet store, and indeed, even today they are still found at such establishments (and also in larger national pet store chains).

Tarantulas and hermit crabs may be “creepy crawly,” but they are as deserving of basic veterinary treatment as any other species. This article introduces the practitioner to these families of multilegged critters, so that they can feel confident in evaluating

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516 Stockbridge Ct, Salisbury, MD 21804, USA
E-mail address: psittacine@all-animals.net

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them and providing basic supportive care, if not outright welcoming them into their practice (or indeed homes!) on a more regular basis.

TARANTULAS

Spiders: the very word sends a wave of fear over many people. It is thought that humans possess a cognitive mechanism to detect specific animals that were potentially harmful throughout evolutionary history; for instance, infants have been found to have the ability to detect images of spiders as potentially harmful.¹ It has also been shown that children can learn the fear of spiders from their mothers, further explaining the strength of our fears.²

Despite a natural human predisposition to fear spiders, there are plenty of spider enthusiasts. There are arachnology and tarantula societies and organizations, nationally and internationally. “Tarantulas” are the most commonly kept family (*Theraphosidae*) of spiders, although occasionally you may find people who keep widows, wolf spiders, orb weavers, and other species. This portion of the article focuses on tarantulas, although most information is applicable to other families of spiders as well. Some of the benefits of keeping tarantulas are found in the following list.

- Tarantulas can live up to 30 years of age.³
- People enjoy caring for spiders (similar to how they enjoy caring for aquarium fish and reptiles/amphibians).
- Owners can firmly bond with their spiders by raising them from spiderling stage (often ≤ 5 mm in leg span) up to adult size (often ≥ 13 cm in leg span).
- Tarantulas are probably the easiest pet to care for and are ideal for people who travel frequently.
- If never manually handled, tarantulas can be very safe pets.
- Tarantulas can amaze owners by decorating their enclosures with webbing and/or digging tunnels.
- Caring for a tarantula creates an increased respect and appreciation for wild spiders.
- Tarantulas take up very little space.

Anatomy

Tarantulas have (in order of length of appendages): 4 pairs of legs, 1 pair of pedipalps, and 1 pair of chelicerae (which contain the paired fangs).⁴ They have a prosoma and opisthosoma; the prosoma is where the legs attach and is equivalent to a fused head and thorax.⁵ The prosoma contains the esophagus and sucking stomach, which leads to the proximal midgut (that in many species has diverticula that lead into the proximal limbs).⁶ There are paired venom glands that exit into the fangs, and a central nervous system (which is divided into 2 ganglions); there is also a large amount of musculature inside the prosoma, for controlling the limbs.⁶

The opisthosoma is the equivalent of an abdomen. It contains more of the midgut and diverticula, the heart dorsally, the book lungs and trachea (respiratory organs) anteriorly, the reproductive organs (ventrally), the spinning glands (posteriorly and ventrally), the Malpighian tubules (excretory organs located mid-to-posteriorly and dorsally), and a stercoral pocket (where excrement from Malpighian tubules and midgut are combined, located posteriorly and dorsally).⁶ Externally, at the distal end of the opisthosoma, there are 2 pairs of spinnerets; silk is also produced from the spigots of the tarsi in multiple tarantula species, enabling them to prevent slipping or falling from a smooth vertical surface.⁷

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