

# Reptile Wellness Management

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## KEYWORDS

• Reptile • Husbandry • Nutrition • Enrichment • Training

## KEY POINTS

- Proper husbandry is the most important factor in keeping reptiles healthy. Deficiencies in husbandry lead to stress and disease.
- Larger, more naturalistic enclosures are recommended in order to decrease stress and encourage more natural behaviors.
- Enrichment programs for reptiles encourage mental stimulation, foraging, and exercise, all of which can benefit their overall health and welfare.
- Operant conditioning and desensitization can be used to train reptiles, shaping behaviors that allow the keeper to interact with the animal in a less stressful manner.

Reptiles have been kept in captivity for many years, and knowledge of their care is always evolving and improving. Proper husbandry is the most important factor in keeping captive reptiles healthy. The number one cause of illness in captive reptiles, and their subsequent presentation to the reptile veterinarian, is improper husbandry. Nutrition, caging, temperature, lighting, humidity, substrate, and so forth are all important for a captive reptile's health. In more recent years, concern over providing exercise and opportunities to exhibit natural behaviors has also increased. These changes allow an animal to act more like a wild conspecific, resulting in a leaner condition, more successful breeding, and longer lifespans.<sup>1</sup> Reptiles that lack appropriate temperature zones, lighting, humidity, hiding places, and proper nutrition are more susceptible to disease than those that are kept under appropriate conditions.<sup>1</sup> Captivity itself creates stress, as an enclosure would almost never be the same size as an animal's normal home range.<sup>2</sup> Improper husbandry conditions commonly create stress, as do constant changes (changing substrate, cages, accessories, adding cage mates), excessive handling, or placing the cage in a high-traffic area.<sup>1-3</sup> The stress response causes immunosuppression leading to increased incidence of disease.<sup>1-4</sup> It can also cause changes in behavior related to reproduction and can even inhibit estrogen and the

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production of vitellogenin in females and decrease testosterone concentrations in males.<sup>2,4</sup> Knowing what is necessary for a species is needed to prevent problems.

There are more than 7000 species of reptiles. Species vary widely in terms of diet, natural behaviors, environment, and so forth; their captive care requirements vary just as widely. It is impossible for one to learn about all species, but there are general guidelines for the care of the different orders and families of reptiles. The animal's natural history should be researched and its care made to mimic that as much as possible. It is prudent for the reptile veterinarian to learn proper husbandry for the common species he or she will be treating and to learn about the products available for reptile owners to purchase. It is also helpful to compile a list of books and Web sites available for reptile owners to refer to for proper husbandry information and to find information about an uncommonly kept species he or she is being asked to treat. Some of these resources are listed in **Table 1**. With the advent of the Internet, there is a wealth of information available; one must learn how to separate the good information from the bad.

## NUTRITION

Proper nutrition of captive reptiles is an area that has gone through many changes over the years and is still constantly evolving. Reptiles are ectothermic, meaning their body temperature varies with the environmental temperature; proper temperature is extremely important for proper digestion and metabolism.<sup>3,5,6</sup> Metabolic rates depend on the species but, in general, are approximately 65% to 75% less than the metabolic rates of mammals.<sup>5,6</sup> Proper husbandry is also important, as animals that are stressed or sick will not eat as readily as they should, leading to further problems. Nutritional recommendations are based on an animal's natural diet and environment, age, activity, reproductive status, season, and overall health.<sup>3,5,7</sup> Generally reptiles are fed more when growing, reproducing, and when active.<sup>7</sup> Many reptile species are able to fast for weeks to months in the wild as an adaptation for times of drought, lack of food,

**Table 1**  
Reliable sources for husbandry information

<a href="http://www.anapsid.org">www.anapsid.org</a>	Main focus is green iguanas but has one-page care sheets on many other species
<a href="http://www.reptilesmagazine.com">www.reptilesmagazine.com</a>	Many care sheets, especially on less common species
<a href="http://www.kingsnake.com">www.kingsnake.com</a>	Has information on many species, care sheets, and forums
<a href="http://www.iherp.com">www.iherp.com</a>	Forums for owners to ask questions, also allows people to set up profiles and keep tracking information for their animals
<a href="http://www.greenigsociety.org">www.greenigsociety.org</a> <a href="http://www.iguanaden.org">www.iguanaden.org</a>	Care information for green iguanas
<a href="http://www.beardeddragon.org">www.beardeddragon.org</a>	Care information for bearded dragons
<a href="http://www.triciaswaterdragon.com">www.triciaswaterdragon.com</a>	Care information for Chinese water dragons
<a href="http://www.pangea.com">www.pangea.com</a>	Care information for crested geckos and <i>Rhacodactylus</i> spp
<a href="http://www.tortoisetrust.org">www.tortoisetrust.org</a>	Care information for box turtles and tortoises
<a href="http://www.russiantortoise.net">www.russiantortoise.net</a>	Care information mainly for Russian tortoises but has information that applies to many tortoise species
<a href="http://www.chameleonecare.net">www.chameleonecare.net</a>	Basic care information for chameleons

This list is not complete. These sources are sources the author has found useful for clients.

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