

Reptiles and amphibians

A guide for pet owners
from Nationwide® pet insurance

Congratulations on your new exotic pet

Whether this is your first exotic pet or you're a seasoned herpetoculturist, make sure you know the basics of keeping your new reptile or amphibian happy and healthy.

Husbandry

Creating and maintaining an appropriate living environment is the most important thing you can do for your pet's health and should be the first step in caring for your pet. Consult your veterinarian to ensure that you're providing the best environment and care.

Heat

Reptiles and amphibians rely on outside sources for heat and need appropriate temperature ranges to digest and absorb nutrients.

- Offer multiple heat sources in one enclosure so your pet can find comfortable spots and avoid burns
- Create hiding and basking spaces in different temperature zones
- Temperature needs can vary by season, depending on the species
- Maintain stable temperature, humidity and ventilation
- Amphibians are especially sensitive to dehydration



Lighting

In captivity, reptiles and amphibians require supplemental ultraviolet light A and B (UVA and UVB) to make up for less time in direct sunlight.

- UVA and UVB lights are critical for maintaining normal levels of calcium in the animal's body
- The ratio of UVA to UVB light and the amount of time the animal needs in that light can vary

Substrate

Substrate needs to be appropriate for your species of pet, consistent with heat and humidity requirements that also allow for natural behaviors.

Inappropriate substrate choices may cause ingestion of substrate resulting in impaction, respiratory problems due to aromatic compounds and skin and eye irritation. Most natural substrates will need to be changed regularly to avoid bacteria buildup.

- Gravel may or may not be covered by sheet or sphagnum moss, leaf litter or mulch
- Avoid acidic materials or materials with sharp or abrasive particles that could injure the animal
- Substrate should be moist without being foul

Amphibian environments

For amphibians and aquatic turtles, water qualities such as temperature, ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH, hardness and dissolved oxygen play a vital role in the animal's health. Amphibians are especially sensitive to dehydration.

Diet

Poor nutrition is the leading cause of disease in reptiles and amphibians. These animals have specialized dietary needs, so talk to your veterinarian to ensure you're feeding an appropriate diet. Also, fresh, clean water should always be available, as it is an essential nutrient. Be cautious not to let your pet become obese by feeding only favorite foods.

Herbivores

- Feed plenty of dark, leafy greens
- Include a variety of colorful vegetables
- Offer fruits for interest and flavor

Insectivores

- Before offering commercially available insects as food, "gut-load" them with a nutrient-rich diet for 1-3 days; wild insects are generally nutrient-rich
- Do not give fireflies as food, as they can be toxic
- Consider farming a variety of insects to ensure good nutritional balance and variety

Carnivores

- Freshly killed or frozen animals that have been thawed in warm water
- Live prey can seriously injure your pet
- Move pet to a separate feeding bin when feeding
- Carnivore feeding schedule will depend on the pet's size and amount of prey offered

Omnivores

- Feed a primarily herbivore diet
- Offer some insects and an occasional mouse

Behavior

The needs of different amphibians and reptiles can vary greatly. Some reptiles and amphibians do better in groups, while others prefer to be solitary. Research your particular pet's environmental needs.

Reptiles, such as iguanas, can grow significantly and require adequate enclosure space to thrive. Some reptiles may develop territorial aggression; at sexual maturity or during mating season, aggression or mating attempts may increase.

- Provide appropriate foraging, basking and hiding areas to prevent behavioral issues
- Males should usually not be housed together
- Avoid grabbing your pet from above, as this can be interpreted as an attack by a predator; instead, approach calmly and gently toward the belly when picking up

Safety

Follow these tips to help ensure the safety of both you and your pet.

Cleaning enclosures

- Clean regularly
- Rinse all surfaces well to prevent your pet from coming into contact with any cleaning agents

Handling amphibians

- Most amphibian species do not tolerate extensive handling
- Frequent handling can result in refusal to eat and susceptibility to secondary infections
- Handling can also disrupt the amphibian's water balance by removing it from their appropriate environment

Burns

- Burns can occur from hot rocks, glass heated with hot pads and heat lamps
- Provide adequate space for your pet to move away from heat sources

Salmonella contamination

- Wash your hands with soap and water immediately after handling reptiles or amphibians
- Clean and disinfect all surfaces that your reptile or amphibian contacts when outside of their habitat
- Wear gloves when cleaning your pet's habitat and its contents
- Don't dispose of wastewater in sinks where you prepare food or get drinking water
- Don't let children younger than 5, the elderly or immunocompromised people handle or touch reptiles or amphibians
- Bathe your pet in a dedicated plastic tub or bin, not in your bathtub or sink



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