



## Tips for you and your lizard

The ownership of a lizard brings with it certain responsibilities which are often not appreciated by the owner because of a general lack of knowledge concerning nutritional and management requirements. The natural environment and nutritional requirements should be duplicated in captivity as closely as possible. Many of the problems seen in captive lizards are directly related to poor husbandry by the novice reptile owner. With a little extra information on your particular type of lizard, you can help your pet live a longer, healthier life.

This outline is a basic guide to lizard care and should by no means replace a good herpetology reference or the advice of a North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian who specializes in this area.

### **General**

Lizards are the most diversified of the reptile group; showing the greatest distinction of feeding and dwelling strategies. Lizards can be herbivores (plant eating), carnivores (meat-eating), or omnivores (plant and meat-eating). Lizards can be aquatic (fresh water), marine (sea-water), terrestrial (land dwelling), and even arboreal (tree dwelling). The life span of lizards ranges from between 3 to 10 years for small lizards and 10 to 20 years for the larger species. You can see how it is very important to know your lizard's needs, so you can evaluate the housing and nutritional needs of a particular species.

### **Environment**

**The Cage:** A common type of cage used for a single captive lizard is a fish aquarium. The size of the aquarium should be large enough to allow for exercise if confinement is 100%. A smaller confinement could be substituted if the lizard is allowed out of its cage for supervised exercise. Think of the animal's comfort. Would you want to live under the conditions to which the lizard is subjected? If a homemade wooden cage is constructed, the cage should be coated with polyurethane to prevent absorption of feces and urine into the wood. The polyurethane should be allowed to air dry for several days before the lizard is placed in the cage. When designing a home made cage, one needs to consider how to properly heat and light the environment and judge the ease of cleaning.

**Heating the cage:** Lizards, like other reptiles, are poikilotherms (cold-blooded), and require external sources of heat and cold to regulate bodily functions. In the wild, basking in the sun or on sun warmed objects is the usual method to raise the lizard's body temperature. When the sun goes down and the temperature drops, lizards have their time of inactivity or rest. Lizards in captivity need this temperature gradient also. There are two common ways to accomplish this. One is the use of the commercially available "Hot Rock," available at most pet stores. The other is the use of a heating pad under one end of the elevated aquarium, care should be taken when using these

devices; they occasionally develop hot spots and could burn your lizard. A periodic check of the heat source will ensure this does not happen. Light sources can also provide minimal heat in the cage but should not be thought of as an adequate heat source when used alone. We recommend the heat source to be situated on one side of the cage, so your lizard can pick the most comfortable temperature. The preferred high optimum temperature for most tropical lizard species is between 85 degrees F and 103 degrees F.

**Lighting the cage:** Captive reptiles rarely receive adequate exposure to Ultra Violet (U.V.), light especially when they are housed indoors. U.V. light is necessary in order for an individual to properly absorb and assimilate dietary calcium. a "Grow Light" or "Vita Lite" should be added to the cage to provide a wide spectrum of light rays. Window glass and plastic filter out U.V. Light; therefore, the light should be set up inside the cage or set upon a screened top so that the lizard cannot be burned. Lizard can also be taken outside on warm sunny days care should also be taken to provide the animal with a shaded area to avoid overheating. In order to approximate a natural photoperiod, it is best to supply 10 to 12 hours of darkness each day. A gradual increase in the number of light hours supplied in the spring and a gradual decrease in the number of light hours provided in the fall and winter months is recommended. Geckos are nocturnal so access to artificial or natural sunlight is not necessary for successful captive maintenance.

**Humidity and Bathing:** For many reptile species commonly sold through the pet-trade, a relative humidity of 50%-70% is ideal. Increasing the humidity during the shedding process will make it easier for your lizard to shed it's skin. You can increase the humidity by misting your lizard with a spray bottle, placing a damp towel near the heat source or bathing your lizard in shallow warm water. Some lizards, like the common green iguana, are very good swimmers and enjoy bathing in deeper water.

**Cage Substrate:** There is no universally accepted litter material. Some materials do not absorb well, some are easily ingested causing obstruction and impaction of the G.I. tract, and some are readily converted into culture media for pathogenic organisms. Wood shavings are highly resinous. Cat litter and corn cob shavings can cause impaction and dehydration. We recommend newspaper, butcher's wrap or artificial turf for cage bottoms. Cleaning and changing substrate is an important husbandry practice. A large portion of the bacterial and fungal diseases of captive reptiles result from their daily exposure to fecal contamination and a damp filthy environment.

**Cage Accessories:** Tree limbs, rocks, logs, and artificial plants provide a more natural environment and encourage normal behavior. They can provide a place to hide when the lizard is resting, a basking area and the opportunity to climb and exercise.

### **Feeding Requirements**

**Water:** Many reptiles will refuse to drink voluntarily from containers of standing water. Some will only drink water by lapping dew like drops from misted foliage; others will drink from vessels of fresh water. Captive reptiles will frequently soak in their water containers. It is imperative to know which lizards will only accept moisture as dew droplets.

**Diet:** Improper nutrition and failure to eat are the most frequent causes of illness and death in captive reptiles. Failure to eat may be due to lack of acceptable food for the

species, prolonged feeding of a nutritionally inadequate diet, too frequent handling, improper environmental temperature, or various other factors. The reptile owner should take extra time to research the natural diet of their pet and provide acceptable supplements which the lizard will eat. This will help ensure a long healthy life. Listed below are some selected food preferences for some of the (most frequent) lizard species we see at North Idaho Animal Hospital. This information is adapted from "Aspects of Captive Reptile Husbandry" by Fredric Frye.

Species	Small Mammals	Birds	Insects	Eggs	Fruits/ Veggies
Gecko	Yes		Yes		Some
Iguana	Yes	Yes	Yes	Some	Yes
Monitor	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tegu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Some

\*Cat and dog food is a well balanced supplement readily eaten by many lizard species.

**Signs of Illness:**

- Improper shedding
- Lack of activity
- Loss of appetite
- Abnormal coloration
- Vomiting or regurgitation
- Swelling

Lizards, like dogs and cats, benefit from an annual examination by your North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian.

*From Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine*