



CHOOSING A REPTILE AS A PET

General Introduction

Reptiles are popular pets. Some people want to own them to be different (never a good reason for owning any pet), some enjoy the lower cost of veterinary care as compared to dogs and cats (this is often, but not always true), and many people who don't have the time to devote to a dog or cat enjoy the relatively "maintenance-free" appeal of a snake, iguana, or turtle.

Before purchasing a reptile, it would be wise to ask yourself several questions:

1. Do I want a pet just to look at or do I want to handle and socialize it?

While many reptiles, especially those purchased as captive-born infants, allow owners to handle them, others do not. Many of the more exotic species such as chameleons do not allow handling and react aggressively or become severely stressed. As a rule, if you want a pet to snuggle with, a reptile is not for you. If, on the other hand, you want an animal you can display, a reptile deserves your consideration.

2. How much time can I devote to my pet?

All pets require **AT LEAST** 15 minutes of observation by the owner each day. The owner who fails to pay at least this much attention to his pet won't detect early signs of disease and is really neglecting his responsibility as a pet owner. Most reptiles need to be fed and watered daily, and often the cages need to be cleaned daily as well (some larger lizards and snakes may only eat every few weeks.) The owner who intends to put his reptile in a cage and observe it only once in awhile should seriously consider his decision to care for this type of pet.

3. Can I afford proper medical care?

ALL reptiles need to be examined immediately after purchase (within 48 hours) and at least annually by a reptile veterinarian! Doing this allows early detection of disease. With very rare exception, exotic pets usually don't act sick (or show any indication of illness) until they are **VERY SICK!** As a rule, **A Sick Reptile Is A Dying Reptile!** Regular veterinary care plus an informed pet owner will greatly reduce illness and death in these pets (as well as the overall cost of medical care).

4. Can I make or buy the correct habitat (home) for my reptile?

At a minimum, most reptiles require a 10-gallon glass aquarium, two pieces of astroturf to line the bottom of the aquarium, a source of heat, and a source of UV light. While not expensive or difficult to assemble, an improper environment is the second most common source of diseases and captivity problems encountered in reptiles (an improper diet is the most common problem).

Reptiles do get sick, and preventing illness is definitely preferred to treatment. As an introduction to reptile diseases, owners must understand that reptiles hide signs of illness quite well. This is called the "preservation response." In the wild, if an animal showed signs of illness every time it felt bad, it would easily be attacked by predators or even members of its own group. Therefore, these animals don't appear ill until the illness is actually quite advanced. Our pet reptiles still retain this "wild" characteristic. To repeat, **"A Sick Reptile Is A Dying Reptile!"** It's very important to take your pet to the veterinarian at the **FIRST** sign of illness. Waiting to see if things get better, or treatment with over-the-counter medications, especially those sold at pet stores, only delays proper treatment and often results in expensive veterinary bills and a dead reptile! Veterinarians can do many things for sick reptiles, but early intervention is critical!

While the principles of diagnosis and treatment of disease is the same regardless of the species or pet, there are important differences between reptiles and dogs and cats. Only a veterinarian with the expertise in treating reptiles should be consulted for medical or surgical advice.

The First Veterinary Visit

Within 48 hours of your purchase, your pet should be examined by a reptile veterinarian. The visit includes determining the animal's weight, as well as checking for lumps and bumps. The pet is examined for signs of dehydration and starvation. A fecal test is done to check for internal parasites. Unlike most pets, it's impossible to get a pet reptile to defecate on command (although many will give you an unwelcome sample if angered!). A reptile's feces is often a hard "ball" of fecal matter; analyzing this material gives little useful information. A colonic wash, similar to an enema, will allow your veterinarian to accurately check for internal parasites. The oral cavity is examined for signs of infectious stomatitis (mouth rot). No vaccines are required for reptiles. Most of the visit will probably be a question and answer session. If all turns out well, your pet will be given a clean bill of health. Just like dogs and cats, pet reptiles should be examined annually and have their stool tested for parasites annually as well.