

TURTLE AND TORTOISE CARE

BY Don Factor, DVM West End Veterinary Office, Newburgh, NY 12550

Turtles and tortoises are quiet but active pets. Hours of enjoyment can be had watching their activity and interacting with them. An individual turtle has a unique shell pattern by which it can be identified. Remember, the shell is living tissue. It is inappropriate to damage it by making marks or holes for identification or for any other reason. When handling turtles, support its body with 2 hands and position your fingers under its feet so it feels secure. Because all turtles can transmit diseases like Salmonella to people, it is advisable to wash your hands thoroughly after handling your pet and keep the environment clean on a daily basis. The most important aspects of correct turtle and tortoise care are diet and UV. Turtles often do not make good pets for young children because the feeding and proper care are more complicated and time-consuming than most realize.

TORTOISES AND TERRESTRIAL TURTLES

Box turtles are omnivores while most tortoises are strictly vegetarian. The most successful diets include a fresh chopped salad of vitamin rich greens (collards, kale, leaf lettuces, bok choy), sweet potato, broccoli, cantaloupe, berries and flowers (hibiscus, nasturtium, dandelion). Omnivores need animal protein too and can be fed pesticide-free earthworms, slugs, crickets, grasshoppers, and pinkie mice. The availability in the enclosure of the correct temperature ranges for the species is essential. Some species like it warm (Sulcata), and some species like it cool (box turtles), while some species must hibernate over the winter. Most turtles and tortoises will show a decrease in appetite in the fall and cooler months. Dog food is no longer recommended as part of a turtle's diet, even if it is a low protein, low fat food. It is important to prevent access to sand, aquarium gravel, pea gravel, ground corncob, walnut shell, artificial turf, cedar or other pressure treated wood chips, predators, temperature extremes and freedom to roam around the house unattended.

AQUATIC TURTLES

Aquatic turtles are almost always carnivores. Commonly kept species are sliders and painted turtles. It is a good practice to try to maintain an interest in dark leafy greens, but most turtles in adulthood will only eat a meat based diet. Prepared foods are available that approximate a balanced diet for most species. For aquatic turtles, water quality is extremely important for good health. Tanks should have filters and at least a 30-50% water change every day to every other day. Algae on the tank and on the shell is normal and is not unhealthy.

Ultraviolet light is essential to the life of all animals, especially reptiles. Without it, active vitamin D3 cannot be formed and calcium metabolism cannot occur. Calcium is needed for bones and muscles, and its deficiency causes life threatening problems in all animals. All turtles and tortoises should have UV supplementation and vitamin/mineral supplements. Tortoises need 1% of the diet by weight to be calcium. Have your reptile vet show you how to calculate the specific amount to give your pet.