



Green Iguana (or other herbivore reptiles): Care and Common

Problems

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The green iguana is one of the most popular reptiles, but is also one of the most frequently seen for medical conditions. It originates from parts of Caribbean Islands and South and Central Americas. Iguanas live from 13-29 years and even though they start out only six inches long can reach up to 5-6 feet in length. Bearded Dragons should be fed 50% herbivore diet and 50% insectivore diet (see Carnivore/Insectivore Lizard Handout).

Diet: Iguanas are strict vegetarians and should never be fed anything but plant proteins. When under 14 inches, the daily diet should be finely chopped up to avoid the iguana from picking out it's favorite vegetables and either offered twice daily or continuously. Then when they reach 14 inches or are up to 2.5 years in age you can offer food once per day, but should still chop the food finely or at least shredded. Once they are adults, over 2.5 years of age and 3 feet in length, you can feed daily or every other day but it should be at least coarsely chopped. Variety is key since the exact diet for an iguana still hasn't been worked out yet.

For every meal the iguana should have one of each of the five categories:

- 40% high calcium greens: Turnip greens, mustard greens, leeks, watercress, collards (cooked), kale, dandelion greens, endive, parsley, yellow wax beans, clover, escarole, carrot tops, parsley, mint, cilantro, and hibiscus leaves and flowers. Spinach, chard, peas, cabbage, and beet greens have high levels of oxalates that tie up calcium. Kale, bok choy, and broccoli leaves have high levels of goitrogens. These last two groups can be used but only in moderation. Romaine lettuce has moderate levels of calcium and can be used but in combination with other high calcium sources. Iceberg, boston, butter, and head lettuce have little nutritional value and shouldn't be used.
- 40% other vegetables: Frozen mixed vegetables, squash (*especially winter/orange squashes such as: acorn, banana, dlicata, Hubbard, kabocha[thought to bring out the blue in skin color], pumpkin, spaghetti, and turban*), sweet potatoes, bell peppers, broccoli, okra, sprouts, beans, yams, and mushrooms. Grated carrots only in moderation due to them containing oxalates. Some low nutritional vegetables are cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, olives, zucchini, and radishes.
- 10% alfalfa pellets-these are very high in plant proteins and calcium. They are available in most rodent pellets. You should soak the pellets prior to feeding in water.
- No more than 10% fruits as these are low in calcium and protein and high in phosphorus some examples that are ok to feed are: figs, papaya, melon (without skin), apple, peaches, plums, strawberries, banana (without skin), grapes, and kiwi.
- Vitamin/mineral supplements: if feeding a varied diet this may not be needed. Powdered calcium carbonate (cuttlebone shavings) is a good calcium supplement. One small pinch in juveniles and hatchlings 7 days per week and one full pinch in adults 4-5 times per week. Vitamins can be given 4-5 days per week in juveniles and hatchlings and in adults 2-3 times per week. A good supplement should contain 100 parts vitamin A to 10 parts vitamin D3 to 1 part vitamin E. When choosing a supplement there are three things that you should look for:
 1. They should give exact instructions on how much to feed.
 2. They should have an expiration date.
 3. They should be species specific and not claim to be for all reptile species.

I do not recommend commercial produced iguana diets since the exact requirements for iguanas is unknown so this makes it difficult, if not impossible to make a complete pelleted diet.

Handling: You should never grab an iguana by the tip of its tail since they can shed their tail. If this occurs don't worry it will grow back, but will never look the same as it did prior. You should use caution when handling your iguana one hand should support the pelvis and back legs, while the other controls their head and forelimbs. You should always assume all captive reptiles have salmonella and anytime you or another pet touch your iguana, you should wash your hands.

Housing: Cage substrate should never be of any material that an iguana may eat or dusty where they may inhale it. This can cause fatal intestinal obstructions. The best choices are alfalfa pellets, recycled paper pellets, newspaper, carpet (very difficult to keep clean), and reptile bark (these should not be cedar or redwood only fir and watch to make sure they aren't too dusty). You should never use cedar chips, gravel, sand, corn cob bedding, clay kitty litter, or other wood shavings.

Cage size should be 1.5-2 times the length of the iguana in one direction and half the length of the iguana in another direction. The ideal size would be 10 x 3 x 6 feet high for an adult iguana. The sides of the cage should be smooth to prevent the iguana's nose from getting trauma to it. Wood is not recommended since it cannot be disinfected properly. The top of the cage should be wire mesh and not glass, as glass will filter out necessary UV light. If you are going to use mesh for the sides of your cage use plastic mesh, polyethylene hardware cloth, or plastic coated wire mesh. I think the easiest and best is just a glass aquarium with a wire top.

Live, non-toxic plants that lack spines, slippery surfaces, and can hold the weight of the iguana are best (Dracaena and ficus trees are two great examples). If dry branches are used they should be the same diameter as the iguana to support its weight and secured to the cage so it doesn't tip over. Reflective surfaces should be avoided as many adult iguanas will attack their image. Iguanas gain no benefit from being housed together and many times will actually fight when housed together.

Iguanas need to have a temperature of 84-90 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 67-77 degrees Fahrenheit at night with a basking light with temperatures at 98 degrees Fahrenheit (since this is their mean activity temperature). The basking light should be on top of the screen of the aquarium to prevent it from tipping over and burning the iguana. Hot rocks should not be used as they may burn the iguana, if a heater is used it should go under the aquarium.

Humidity should also be maintained in the cage, you can do this by using a humidifier (make sure it is not too close to cause burns), frequent spraying, or large water bowls with a large surface area. Another option is make a humidity box-see bottom of handout.

Ultraviolet light is very important for the iguana. They need the UVB light (290-320 nm) for activation of Vitamin D which helps maintain appropriate calcium levels and UVA light (320-400 nm) for behavioral as well as psychological effects. Direct sunlight for at least 15-30 minutes per week at a minimum would be very beneficial. Window glass filters out UV lights so any lamp or direct sunlight should not be through a window. Light should not be on 24 hours per day, 12 hours per day is sufficient. UV lights lose their effectiveness after 6 months and need to be changed.

Common diseases

- Metabolic bone disease-this is very common in captive reptiles and is due to inadequate calcium and vitamin D3 in the diet and inadequate UVB light source.
- Renal failure-this is caused from too much calcium, vitamin D3, and/or protein in the diet.
- Intestinal parasites-avoidable with yearly fecal samples checked by your veterinarian.
- Burns-from heat lamps falling on an iguana or from using hot rocks.
- Intestinal impaction-caused from improper bedding that the iguana ingests or inhales causing the rectum to prolapse.

Humidity Box Directions

1. Cut a hole in a plastic box with a lid large enough for the reptile to get in and out easily. This should be the only hole in the box.
2. Loosely pack the box with dry sphagnum moss and wet it down with water. Let the moss sit for 10-15 minutes to absorb the water, then squeeze out the excess water and empty the left over water from the box.
3. Place the box in the cage half in the heat source and half out. Place the reptile in the box for the first time but after that let it go in and out as it pleases.
4. Check the box every 2-3 days for cleanliness. If the reptile doesn't drag food into the box or defecate in it, the box may stay clean for several weeks.