



Turtles can make interesting pets. However, few people realize that they require a great deal of care to keep them healthy. Turtles, like all other pets, can carry disease. Therefore, owners should wash their hands after handling their pets, and young children should not be allowed to handle the – or any small animal – without adult supervision.

HOUSING:

The ideal situation for your pet is to duplicate its natural environment as closely as possible. Turtles can grow very large when cared for properly and given plenty of space to swim. A large heated aquarium, provided with a deep swimming area and rock or shelf where the turtle can get completely out of the water provides suitable indoor quarters. Some baby turtles are best reared in very shallow water, allowing them to feed in slightly deeper water. In warm climates or during the summer, turtles can be kept outdoors in ponds or plastic pools with islands fashioned from rocks or floating basking material such as logs or cork boards. With smaller turtles be sure to cover the pool with screening to prevent the entry of birds, cats, dogs, etc. NEVER put turtles (or tortoises) outside in a glass aquarium as the glass heats up too fast, making the water extremely hot. The pool or pond should also be partially shaded. (A board placed over a portion of the pool will allow needed shade. The setup should be completely dismantled and scrubbed thoroughly from time to time to Prevent growth of microorganisms that can cause illnesses. A calcium block made from plaster of paris or one purchased from a pet store should be placed in the water.

HEATING:

A heat source must be provided, whether an aquarium heater or the light itself. Submersible heaters are available which allow more shallow water than regular aquarium heaters require. Temperature should be maintained at 75-85°F. An overhead light for warmth during the day should be installed above the basking area. It should be turned off at night to simulate normal daytime/nighttime conditions in nature.

NATURAL SUNLIGHT:

This is essential to the well being of the average water turtle in order to properly utilize calcium and to properly assimilate the food as well as for curing sundry minor scratches or skin ailments. Sunlight filtered through the glass is deprived of its value; sunlight must reach the turtle unfiltered. When placing a turtle in the sun, be sure a shaded area is available to escape the heat, which can kill it quickly. Also watch to see that the water does not become too hot from the sun. UVA/UVB bulbs are good sun substitutes used in conjunction with direct sunlight. They require a fluorescent fixture for installation, and do not give off warmth for basking purposes. If preferred to this lighting arrangement a Mercury vapor bulb may be used that fulfills all requirements.

FEEDING:

Most turtles must be fed directly in the water; otherwise they cannot swallow. Turtles eat a variety of chopped lean raw meats and occasional greens. A few turtles like banana as a treat. Beef, fish, smelt and fresh shellfish, earthworms, tubifex worms and brine shrimp (for babies) should comprise their diet. Calcium, bone meal and liquid or powdered vitamins should be added to their food to supplement their diet. Small turtles should be fed every day and larger ones at least three times a week. Always remove excess food when the turtle shows no further interest in it. Some turtle keepers prefer to feed their pets in a separate container for easier tank

cleaning, but some turtles will not feed when removed from their tank for feeding. Great advances have been made in the last few years with high quality prepared foods, many turtles take readily to these as part of a varied diet.

ILLNESSES:

Most turtle ailments—land and aquatic—are a result of improper diet and lack of natural sunlight. All sick turtles should be isolated from other turtles, and newly acquired turtles (or tortoises) should be isolated for at least three months and watched for disease symptoms before placing them in with others. Fungus appears as white or gray spots, lumps or flakes on the shell and fleshy parts. Adding 1/4-cup plain table salt to each five gallons of water is a good preventative. Fungus remedies sold for tropical fish can be used in the water. Shell fungus can be painted lightly with 5% iodine, allowing it to dry before putting the turtle back into the water. This procedure should be repeated daily. Very clean water and natural sunlight are needed to facilitate healing, which can take up to a year.

A soft shell and swollen eyes are due to improper diet and lack of natural sunlight. Make sure vitamins and bone meal are added to the diet and that the turtle is placed in unfiltered sunlight for several hours each day (a shaded area must be provided when placing the turtle in the sun). Immediately consult a veterinarian experienced in treating turtles and he can recommend the proper treatment. Call another keeper, your Humane Society, or a local club for a referral. If you are online, go to [Locating a Veterinarian](#) to find a reptile medicine specialist near you. You can also network to find a vet near you that works with turtles.

Turtles are highly susceptible to respiratory ailments caused by drafts, abrupt temperature changes and improper diet. Symptoms include gasping and runny or bubbly noses. The turtle should be kept warmer than normal and quiet to hasten recovery. If the condition does not improve in short order, consult a veterinarian. Time is always critical in reptile and amphibian illnesses because, by the time the affliction has manifested itself, it has reached a possibly fatal stage.

Flesh injuries resulting from bites, scratches, or cuts can be treated with a variety of antibiotic ointments and/or creams which your veterinarian can recommend. Water soluble antibiotic ointments such as nolvasan ointment or silver sulfadiazine are best as they do not impede healing like oil based creams do. NOTE: Anytime a turtle or tortoise is injured, it MUST be brought into the house immediately to prevent flies from laying eggs on the wound; maggots will result. Basking rocks should be checked for sharpness and replaced if too sharp or abrasive. Remember that water turtles must surface occasionally and can brush the rocks.

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