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METABOLIC BONE DISEASE IN REPTILES

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Since I opened my new practice in Central Point in 2008, I have become a resource for owners of reptiles. Not many veterinarians are willing to examine and treat these critters. As calls and pets come in, I am seeing an increase in a condition called Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD). This condition can be seen in most reptiles but is most prevalent in young, growing lizards and turtles. For various reasons, these reptiles develop an abnormal calcium metabolism, which results in low blood calcium and eventually parathyroid disease and kidney failure.

The abnormal calcium metabolism is nearly always in part due to improper husbandry. Diets deficient in calcium or excessive in other minerals, improper lighting, temperature and humidity conditions have all been related to MBD. Species differ greatly in their natural diet, ability to absorb calcium from the gut, and specific requirements for light, temperature and humidity. It is vitally important that reptile owners be aware of the specific requirements of their pet. Many pet store employees are not well trained and occasionally give bad advice about how to care for the reptile. Don't be afraid to consult your veterinarian about information regarding reptile care.

Metabolic Bone Disease is a heart breaking condition to diagnose. Calcium is involved in bone development, nerve conduction and muscle function. Most young, growing lizards present with swollen limbs, broken bones, backbones and tails, soft or swollen jaws and failure to grow. One of the most common signs is the inability to raise the entire body from the ground. Muscle twitching, seizures, paralysis, egg binding, constipation and behavior changes have also been seen.

Diagnosing and staging MBD requires an exam, x-rays, and bloodwork. The most important aspect of treatment is evaluation of the reptile's environment to correct deficiencies. Dietary changes and supplementation will also be part of the management of the disease. Animals that are very weak and are not eating may need to be tube fed or

force fed and assisted with hydration. At the same time, reptiles affected by MBD should be handled as little as possible as their bones are weak and can fracture easily. They are very susceptible to stress.

In many cases, the effects of MBD will not be completely reversible. Treatment is usually long term and may be lifelong. Follow up veterinary care is usually required and often involves monitoring blood levels and adjusting diet and supplements as well as monitoring organ function. Some will require months to recover.

Although children are especially interested in having a reptile for a pet, reptiles are not pets for kids. They require a strong commitment to daily care and knowledge of husbandry to provide more than a slow, painful death for an animal. Consult your veterinarian before purchasing a reptile as a pet and do your homework. Successfully raising a captive reptile can be a very rewarding hobby. But it is a large commitment and is not inexpensive. Make sure this is right for you before you adopt.