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CARING FOR YOUR IGUANA

GENERAL: When cared for correctly, iguanas can grow to 5-6 feet in length and often live for 10-15 years (up to 30 years). Most pet iguanas are adapted to the jungles of South & Central America. When you choose a “wild animal” as a pet, you must provide conditions which mimic the natural habitat and feed a balanced diet.

FOOD: Iguanas are omnivorous (eating plants and animals) and eat a wide variety of foods. Baby iguanas need more protein and calcium for growth and may show more carnivorous tendencies than adults. Most of the diet (75-85%) should be vegetables and fruits, especially leafy greens, and may include dandelions, kale collards, melons, and other common vegetables. Ideally use a nutritional guide to choose veggies with good calcium/phosphorous content. Healthy iguanas should be willing to eat a good variety of veggies, at least 8 to 10 types; this minimizes the potential for dietary imbalances.

In addition to vegetables, iguanas need some protein and a vitamin - mineral source. The easiest way to provide both safely is via feeding a good iguana food as 5-25% of the overall diet. Both dry and canned forms exist; the best is probably dry pellets which are bright colored and smell fruity. Pretty Pets is one of the more palatable brands, and T-Rex is a similar product. The protein content of juvenile iguana food should be around 18%; adult food usually has larger pellets and should have a lower protein content (around 12-14%). These pellets can be fed dry, or softened in water, or crushed to a powder and sprinkled liberally on damp vegetables. The simplest healthy diet is ~75-85% veggies and 15-25% iguana food. Avoid dog food, cat food or monkey chow as these may have unbalanced protein and vitamin contents for iguanas.

If you cannot use iguana food, then protein and vitamins should be provided in other ways, although achieving a healthy balance is more difficult. Safe protein sources include beans (various types), soybean (as in tofu), earthworms (use nightcrawlers, *not* redworms or compost worms), and crickets (feed the crickets a high calcium “gut loading” cricket diet (T-Rex) for 2 days prior to using crickets as food, or they will be calcium deficient. High protein sources such as these should be 20% or less of the diet. *Minimize* these protein sources if iguana food is already being used. Vitamin + mineral supplements should only be used if no iguana diet is fed, and then used *sparingly*. Never mix products; use a balanced vitamin-mineral powder with many vitamins + calcium provided, and put a tiny pinch on the food once weekly, no more. Reptocal and Reptivite are 2 brands which offer balanced formulations. Overdosing is a common problem with using supplements; it is safer to rely on a commercial food which has the appropriate vitamins included.

HOUSING: Try to duplicate natural conditions. Large terrariums are best. The most important factors are heat and light. The ideal daytime air temperature is 85-95°F. Below 80°F or above 100°F can cause stress and failure to thrive. The cage sides and top should be mostly solid, not screen, in order to trap heat and humidity. A reptile heat pad placed under the terrarium is a good heating method. Hot rocks provide heat but must be covered to prevent direct contact which may burn the iguana. Heat lamps are useful but must be at a safe distance to prevent burns (at least 18 inches usually). Heat lamps must *not* be bright if used at night; the best are lightless ceramic-coated lamps such as made by Pearlco or Flukers; dim purple or red coated night bulbs may also be used. Monitor cage temperature at several spots with good mercury or dial type thermometers; avoid color strip thermometers which stick to the cage wall as they are not accurate. The most accurate readings are in the shade away from any heat sources. The terrarium can have a warmer side approaching 95-100°F, and a cooler area around 85°F. If the cage temperature is uniform then aim at 90°F as an ideal temperature. Do not let the temperatures fall below 78-80°F at night.

Lighting requires special attention. You must provide both visible (white) light and ultraviolet light in the 280-320nm spectrum (called UV-B). This mimics outdoor sunlight which iguanas require. Our climate provides too little sunlight and window glass or plexiglass filters out most of the sun's UV rays. Lack of proper lighting cause's poor or picky appetites, poor growth, and bone disease. Provide correct lighting with a fluorescent "full spectrum" light. Reptisun (made by Zoo med) and Reptile D-Light provide strong UV levels; other brands with adequate UV output include Verilux, Reptile Daylight (Energy Savers Unlimited), Reptiglo, Reptasun (by Flukers), and Vita Lite. These are all fluorescent tubes; in general no regular incandescent bulb produces good UV light. These lights have a limited effective lifespan and should be changed every 6-8 months when in use. A good day length is 12-14 hours of light. These lights will not cause burns, and they need to be close to the pet to be effective, usually closer than the length of the light bulb. (A 24 inch tube should be within 18 inches of the lizard to be effective). Avoid plastic or glass barriers between the light and the pet. Minimize hiding from the light (such as in a dark cave); instead provide a hiding shelter *behind* a plant or a rock where the light is still strong, or cover part of the transparent cage wall with paper to allow hiding in that area. Call us for light sources.

More recently some full spectrum incandescent (screw type) round bulbs have appeared which *do* produce strong UV levels. These resemble regular light bulbs but are actually mercury vapor lamps; they produce high UV output and heat, so must be kept at a safe distance (at least 18 inches away). Their effective life span is uncertain; to be safe replace them yearly. These devices typically cost \$45-\$100, but when shut off must have a "cool down" period before they can be turned back on. Other "full spectrum" round bulbs which cost less and require no "cool down" cycle are simple filament-type bulbs and do *not* produce good UV output.

Branches may be provide for the iguana to climb on. Do not trim nails on iguanas who climb as they will slip and fall, often breaking bones. A small water bowl provides drinking water and cage humidity. Do not allow prolonged soaking and defecating in the water, as this contaminates the water source and may also cause skin infections. Artificial

turf is a good cage bedding which can be cleaned and reused. Sand, gravel, corn cob, walnut shells, ect are harder to keep clean and may cause intestinal blockages if eaten.

COMMON DISEASES:

Osteodystrophy (Rickets) - A calcium deficiency usually due to poor diet and/or too little light. Symptoms include weakness, tremors, soft jaw, swollen or crooked legs. Treatment is via injectable or oral calcium, and correction of diet and lighting is critical.

Stomach or bowel blockage- Iguanas may develop blockages from swallowing bedding such as sand or gravel. Small amounts may be passed with the aid of mineral oil. Severe cases may need surgery to remove the obstruction. Cool temperatures slow the bowel and increase risk of blockages and constipation.

Limb Fractures- Due to trauma, or secondary to soft bones (Rickets). The limb is usually splinted. Correcting diet and lighting is critical.

Heart Burn/ skin infection- Unprotected hot rocks, heat pads, or heat lights can cause burns. Burned skin often becomes infected. Bacterial or fungal infections can also result from lying in a contaminated water or on a soiled flooring. 5-10 days may be adequate. For severe lesions, dead tissue may need surgical removal followed by injectable antibiotics. Correct the habitat as well.

Mouth rot and respiratory infection- These are usually caused by normal bacteria which take advantage of a stressed or weakened lizard; underlying factors such as cool temperatures or imbalanced diets often play an important role in causing these illnesses. Mouthrot causes red swollen gums and sometimes pus, odor or drooling. Cool air temperatures or mouth injury are common causes. Tongue infections cause swelling or paralysis of the tongue; the lizard may try to eat but the tongue won't extend out of the mouth as far as it should, making eating difficult. Respiratory infections can cause mucus discharge in the mouth or nose which may resemble Mouthrot, but the gums are usually normal. These diseases are treated with antibiotics and correction of diet and environment. **NOTE:** Normal iguanas often sneeze and have little watery nasal discharge which may dry to a white crust on the nose. This is excess salt secretions which the iguana eliminates via salt glands in the nose and is not an infection.

Kidney Disease- An occasional cause of death in older iguanas. The causes are poorly understood, but damage to the kidneys may be caused by aging, low temperatures, overdosing calcium or vitamins, infection, dehydration, or other illness. Signs are variable and may include lethargy, tremors, weight loss, appetite loss, and color changes. Treatment includes a low mineral, low protein diet and fluid therapy; most severe cases do not survive.

Intestinal parasites: Two different parasites are common in lizards: coccidia and pinworms. Coccidia are microscopic protozoa that live in the bowel; when severe they cause diarrhea, weight loss, straining to defecate and even colon prolapse (bowel protruding from anus). Pinworms are a small white worm; severe infestations can cause signs similar to coccidia. Diagnosis of parasites is done via examination of a fresh (within 24 hours) fecal sample. Treatment with appropriate medication, along with thorough cage cleaning, eliminates the parasites. Pinworm eggs live for long periods in the environment and may re-infect a treated lizard. Coccidia are slow to clear from the gut and may require three weeks of medication to eliminate infection.

Egg Binding: Female iguanas over 11-12 inches long (not including the tail) may produce large numbers of eggs yearly, Usually between February and April. They may become very bloated with eggs and stop eating; some may refuse to lay the eggs, either due to lack of suitable laying sites or due to inability to lay them. Failure to lay eggs may result in weight loss and eventual death. Most egg retention is behavioral; iguanas may refuse to lay unless provided an underground chamber. In captivity a closed dark box with a small entry is often adequate; cover the bottom with sand or peat moss to dig in. The box should be big enough to easily allow the iguana to turn around and exit. A few iguanas may have physical problems which prevent egg laying; most of these will lay the eggs if given an oxytocin to stimulate contractions. Few need surgery to remove the eggs, but if needed they are usually spayed at the time. Suspect egg production in a female iguana who suddenly looks fat through the belly, especially if her appetite is slowly decreasing. Encourage egg laying by providing warm air temperatures (90-95° F); the eggs are not fertile unless she was bred.

(Courtesy Drs. Mark Burgess & Melinda Surrency @ Southwest Veterinary Hospital –
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