



Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

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Picking a Healthy Reptile

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Contrary to what many people believe, most pet stores do not care for their reptiles properly. Many cannot even accurately species identify their animals, going on whatever the importer or dealer wrote on their invoice...and, all too often, the dealer and wholesaler are wrong, incomplete, or careless. In addition, most imported animals are sick, scratched, and infested with parasites (not all of which may be seen without a microscope). All of these conditions are made worse by the severe stress they have been suffering from the moment they were captured, which may be weeks before they actually arrived at your pet store or vendor at the expo. Even many captive bred reptiles fare poorly in pet stores, when they are subjected to improper lighting, heating, food, humidity, etc.

One of the reasons there has been such an effort to stop the import bird trade is that, for every bird that is still alive when it reaches the U.S., wildlife trade observers and monitoring agencies estimate that 60 birds have died. The ones who are still alive after the mandatory quarantine period (and some quarantine facilities should be shut down due to the care they provide the animals sent there), they are often sick and highly stressed once they hit the pet stores. The figures for reptiles are about the same as for imported birds. In other words, since your pet store is very likely getting sick animals, any animal you buy is likely to be sick. Since most pet stores don't know even the basics about the species they sell, they can't tell a healthy one from a sick one, or, worse, they just don't care. A few stores do demand healthy animals and return sick ones to the wholesaler, who then turn around and ship the sick animals out to a less picky or observant store.

Here are some things to look for when considering a reptile. First of all, don't just buy the first one you see. Visit several stores. Since many reptiles live for decades, you can amortize the time you spend driving around to different stores, carefully inspecting as many animals as you can, over the life of the animal itself. Looked at that way, it's not such a big deal. And besides, shouldn't you spend at least as much time-or more-picking out a living creature than you do a stereo or new tires?

Body

Is the skin clean, clear, firm, free of scratches and bites?

Bites and scratches may lead to infected abscesses later on.

Is the belly free of burns?

Burns may heal, but the skin may, from then on, always be sensitive to bottom heat.

Is the belly free from ground-in feces?

Feces on skin and claws indicate an unsanitary environment and probably a weak and sick animal. Feces on the back of a reptile may indicate a very sick one who is too weak to get out from under stronger cagemates.

Is the vent free of dried feces and urates?

Presence indicates a weak, and possibly parasite- and protozoan-loaded reptile.

Are the body, limbs, and tail free of lumps and bumps and swelling other than the joints?

Abscesses, cysts, and broken bones require veterinary care and treatment.

Are the back legs shaped normally for that species, or is there a large, hard knot in both thighs?

One hard, swollen leg may be a broken bone; both similarly swollen is likely to be severe calcium deficiency.

If a turtle or tortoise, is there plenty of flesh between the neck and forearms, or is there a deep recess on both sides of the neck?

Deep recesses indicate a starved chelonian.

On lizards, are the limbs like twigs, or are the hip bones jutting up? If a snake, is the body rounded and firm, or is the backbone prominent? If a lizard, are the tail bones visible or easily felt?

Emaciated, probably dehydrated; possible internal parasite and/or bacterial infections: requires veterinary care.

If a turtle or tortoise, is the shell firm and without defects?

Soft shells indicate metabolic bone disease. Defects indicate possible shell infection due to being kept in unsanitary conditions; there may be a systemic infection, as well.

Head/Eyes/Ears/Nose/Mouth

Are the eyes bleary, weepy, crusted?

Possible respiratory infection, eye inflammation/infection, or mite infestation.

Is it gaping (breathing with mouth open)?

If the enclosure is not too hot for the species, and it is not a lizard giving an open-mouth threat, it is a sign of a respiratory infection.

Is the nose free of wet or dried mucous, or is it "runny"? (Note: if salty deposits are present, is this normal for the species.)

Bubbly or dried mucous indicates respiratory infection; requires veterinary care. Runny nose and/or eyes indicates respiratory infection.

Is the interior of the mouth pale or grayish pink? Stringy, ropery, or sheeting mucous? Small yellowish, whitish or greenish patches in gums, tongue or roof of mouth? (Gently pull down on the dewlap to open the mouth)

Systemic infection causing secondary mouthrot; requires veterinary care.

Is the lower jaw swollen out equally on both sides?

Indicates probably metabolic bone disease.

If a turtle or tortoise, are there any swellings near the ears?

Indicates systemic infection and abscesses.

If a turtle or tortoise, are the eyes swollen?

Could indicate respiratory infection, hypothermia, or, in less frequent cases, vitamin A deficiency.

Are there any lumps or swellings on the face, neck, or dewlap? (Note: large sexually mature male iguanas often have large fleshy jowls surrounding the large subtympenic scale and soft swellings on the top of their heads--both of which are normal and healthy; tegus may have fleshy jowls below and caudal to their ears.)

Swellings, hard or soft, may be infected abscesses; requires veterinary care.

General Appearance/Movement/Other

Can you feel the reptile resist you as you move its limbs?

Weakness or shakiness indicates a severely debilitated or sick reptile. If a lizard or turtle, it may be suffering from calcium deficiency. In snakes, especially boas and pythons, it could be inclusion body disease. If it is a boa or python, I strongly suggest you not buy any boa or python from that store/breeder/vendor. Wash thoroughly and change your clothes before handling anyone else's boas and pythons and before touching any of your boas, pythons, or their enclosures.

Are there any black, dark reddish brown, or bright orange dots (mites) moving around the snake's or lizard's body? Look especially carefully around the ears, armpits, and along the neck and dorsal crest on lizards, and under the belly scales and under the chin and neck on snakes.

Indicates overall poor care and lack of concern in the store and possibly weakened and sick lizard.

If a turtle or tortoise, do the legs pull away from you strongly when you gently tug on them?

A healthy chelonian will firmly pull the limb away from you; a sick one will pull more weakly, or may not react at all.

Is the body extremely wrinkled, dull looking?

Dehydrated. May also be a sign of improper environmental conditions preventing the snake or lizard from shedding.

When you hold it, can you hear a clicking or wheezing sound when it breathes?

This is another sign of respiratory infection.

Behavior

A healthy reptile may try to avoid being caught when you or the pet store employee/vendor go into the enclosure.

Once in hand, it may try to escape from you. It may musk or defecate on you. It may try to bite your fingers. It will be alert to its surroundings, checking you out as much as you are checking it out, and looking around. This is all normal behavior. A reptile who lays there, unresisting, uninterested in what is going on around it, is sick. While some pre-owned reptiles may relax when being held, they will still appear alert and responsive, to you and to activity going on around you. Apathy and lethargy should not be confused with tameness.

A sick baby, juvenile, or adult may still try to avoid being caught and held, and may still try to flee, but will do so with less strength, noticeable once you have them in hand.

Once you have held healthy reptiles, the weak muscle tone of a sick one will be hard to miss. A diurnal lizard whose leg or toe muscles tremor or twitch in the absence of any other movement has metabolic bone disease.

A possible exception to the "lethargy = sick" rule is if the store or vendor has kept the reptile too cold.

They will naturally be sluggish, slow moving and very slowly or nonresponsive. Some stores keep them too cold because they don't know or care. Others do it to keep wild, untamed animals quiet, making them easier to sell to customers who don't know any better. If the reptile is cold, ask the employee/vendor to warm it up, or skip the store and go elsewhere. If the reptiles have been kept too cold for too long, they are very likely sicker than ones kept properly.

In closing...

Take your time...it will be well worth it in the long run. If you have to force it (you want a snake or lizard **now**, or you are battling to get one fit into your living space and schedule, then the time or the species just isn't right for you at this time. Be patient. Wait until that right one comes along, or until you are living in such a place or way where you can truly provide what that animal needs to not only survive, but thrive.