

Turtles & Tortoises

Nutrition

One of the most common problems encountered when raising turtles & tortoises involves improper nutrition. Variety in the diet, and using the proper dietary supplements remain the keys to keeping your pet healthy and maintaining healthy growth. In addition, pelleted foods for all types of turtles are becoming more popular. Many pet stores that sell reptiles offer these pellets as well.



Aquatic Turtles: Young turtles under one year of age should receive about 25% vegetables & fruit in the diet. The other 75% should be made up of a commercially prepared food (Purina Trout Chow is good) that is high in protein, and is to some extent meat-based. Commercially prepared foods are preferable because they are vitamin supplemented and are less likely to be contaminated with parasites or bacteria. If you do not wish to use, or cannot find a commercially prepared pellet, you can substitute a combination of earthworms, dry dog food, small fish, pinkies (day old mice), shrimp meal, spinach, carrots, broccoli, and mustard greens. Pet-Cal tablets can be used as a Calcium/Vitamin D supplement, and Pet Tabs (For Dogs) can be used as a multivitamin supplement for turtles not on pelleted food. Feed these tablets, broken into small pieces, on feeding days.

Young turtles need to be fed daily, while adults only need 2-3 feedings weekly. Water turtles need to be fed in water, and for ease of cleaning, should be fed in a separate tank. If you're lucky they'll defecate there too.

Tortoises: Need a more vegetarian diet. Only 15% of the diet should be made up of high protein sources, like dog food. Tortoises prefer dandelions, fresh fruit and mixed vegetables. Large tortoises also need a higher level of calcium in their diet. Foods like alfalfa, prickly pear cactus pads, mulberry leaves, palm fronds, and banana leaves supply high calcium. Tortoises and land turtles will also, usually preferentially eat red foods.

Feedings are usually done daily, but you may have luck with 2-3 weekly feedings as well.

Box Turtles: Need a 50/50 split of high protein foods and fruits and vegetables. Dog food (Like Cycle 4 or Gaines Burgers), earthworms and pinkies should be added to a mixture of diced, bite-sized fruits and vegetables. Bananas, peaches, pears, papayas, frozen mixed vegetables, mushrooms, squash, and yams are good sources of nutrition. To these you can add, yogurt, hard boiled egg and cottage cheese as a treat.

Feedings are usually done daily, but you may have luck with 2-3 weekly feedings as well.

Temperature:

Turtles require a water temperature of 70-80 degrees in their enclosures. Because of this, they will need an external heat source like a typical aquarium water heater. There should also be a dry land area set up for basking. An incandescent light bulb or heat lamp can be used for supplemental heat.

Tortoises need temperatures in the 80-85 degree range, with an area constructed for shade.

Box Turtles need temperatures in the 75-80 degree range, with an area for shade. You can use a heating pad, placed underneath the cage with a ¼ inch space for air circulation. You can use heat lamps and incandescent bulbs can be used, and can direct heat to one portion of the cage, but can sometimes be too hot.

Ultraviolet Light Source:

Like all animals, turtles & tortoises need an ultraviolet light source to synthesize Vitamin D, which is crucial for proper calcium metabolism. Sunlight filtered through windows or cage glass is insufficient, because glass and most plastics filter UV rays out. Box Turtles & Tortoises should spend two to three hours in direct sun every day. Plus they will also need an interior source for fall, spring & winter. What works best is to find a lightbulb specifically manufactured to help grow plants indoors, or one made for reptile habitats. Those lights are manufactured to provide a good source of Ultraviolet-A radiation. Blacklights are not very popular anymore. You can find a good incandescent light that throws off UVA radiation, and that should serve its purpose.

Incandescent

> 5 Feet from Cage
on 10 -12 hours daily
replace every 6 - 7 months

Blacklight

< 18 Inches from Cage
on 8 hours daily
replace every 6 - 12 months

Many people now think reptiles are also well served by having a source of Ultraviolet-B light over their cages. Almost all of the UV-B lights available are of the fluorescent type, and they are best found at pet stores which sell reptiles. These lights should be changed every 6 months as well.

Housing:

Aquatic Turtles: Any enclosure should provide an adequate area for swimming and an area for basking. If there is no basking area, many small turtles will become exhausted and may drown. A platform of rocks or a firmly secured piece of wood may be used. Many pieces of wood will need to be weighed down to prevent tipping. If an aquarium is to be used, a pane of glass can be inserted to divide the space into 1/3 basking & 2/3 swimming areas. Fine sand should be used as a covering for the tank bottom, because gravel can be abrasive and can cause an obstruction if swallowed. The basking area can be filled with large core gravel, and then covered with plants or sand.

Tap water is probably safe for most turtles, provided it sits for 48 hours prior to use. Bottled water is safer, as it is not subject to variations in iron content or fluoridation levels. If a species requires brackish water (Like Diamondback Terrapins) 1 tbsp of uniodized salt/gallon is appropriate. Adding small amounts of vinegar to keep the pH 6.0-6.5 may help retard bacterial growth. A teaspoon of noniodized aquarium salt/gallon may also help in hygiene.

It is important to have a cage, which is hygienic and is easy to clean. Most bacterial & fungal infections can be directly traced to stool contamination and a damp, must environment. The cage bottom should be covered with newspaper or butcher paper +/- indoor /outdoor carpeting. Several pieces of carpeting should be used so one is drying while the other is in use. Avoid corncobs, wood shavings, kitty litter, fine gravel, sand or sawdust. This material is easily contaminated, and can be ingested causing life-threatening obstructions. Avoid moss or naturally growing grass, as their high moisture content can be a problem. Once any urine or fecal matter contaminates the enclosure, it should be cleaned. Avoid using pine scented cleaners and Lysol. They can be toxic.

A firmly attached branch or non-resinous hardwood (oak, birch, apple, pear, or cherry) should be placed in the cage. Make sure the diameter of the branch allows for easy grasping. Driftwood, grapevines or ropes can enrich the environment. Silk, artificial plants are easy to keep clean, and, unlike plastic plants, are not a potential source of obstructions. Real plants are fine, but make sure they aren't toxic.

An area should be set up as a hiding place. Reptiles feel more comfortable if they feel secure. Some will not eat if denied a place to hide.

One Turtles per cage is best. They are very territorial and may fight.

Salmonella:

Salmonella is commonly associated with food poisoning in people but is a normal organism found in the digestive tract of most reptiles. Because of that, after handling turtles & tortoises, it is best to wash your hands. Also, ban him from your kitchen for safety's sake. Any reptile crawling around on your countertops is dangerous to you and to him.

The best cleaners for reptile enclosures are the Quaternary Ammonium compounds, and they kill salmonella as well. The Wipe Out line of products are an excellent cleaning solution. The typical turtle tank should be completely taken apart and cleaned once weekly. This helps contain the spread of disease and parasites as well.