



Mark E. Burgess DVM  
2425 SW Cedar Hills Blvd.  
Beaverton, OR 97005  
(503) 643-2137

## CARING FOR YOUR IGUANA

When cared for correctly, iguanas can grow to 5-6 feet in length and often live for 10-20 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 & feed a balanced diet.

**FOOD:** Iguanas are primarily herbivorous and eat a wide variety of leafy greens. Baby iguanas need more protein and calories for growth, and may show more omnivorous tendencies than adults. Most of the diet (75-85%) should be vegetable based, mostly *leafy greens*, and may include dandelions, kale, collards, papaya, and other common vegetables. Ideally use a nutritional guide to choose vegies with good calcium/phosphorous content. Iguanas should eat a good variety of vegies, at least 8 to 10 types; this reduces 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 or tortoise 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 lower protein content (around 12-14%). These pellets can be fed dry, or softened in water, or ground up to a powder and sprinkled liberally on damp vegetables. The simplest healthy diet is ~75%-85% vegies and 15%-25% iguana food. Avoid dog food, cat food or monkey chow.

If you can not 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), Phoenix worms, earthworms (use nightcrawlers, but not redworms or compost worms), and crickets or Dubia roaches (feed these insects a high calcium “gut loading” cricket diet (T-Rex Calcium Plus or Mazuri) for 2-3 days prior to using the insects as food, or they will be calcium deficient). High protein sources such as insects should be less than 20% of the diet in juveniles, and probably no more than 5% of the adult 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 + minerals provided (*not* a simple calcium + vitamin D powder), and put a *tiny pinch on the food once weekly*, no more. Reptocal and Reptivite are 2 brands which offer some balanced formulations. Overdosing is a potential 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 & light. The ideal daytime air temperature is 85-95<sup>0</sup>F. Below 80<sup>0</sup>F or above 100<sup>0</sup>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. The most accurate readings are in the shade away from any heat sources; place the thermometer near ground level and cover it with a cardboard or wood shield. Keep all heat sources at the other end of the cage. The terrarium can have a warmer side approaching 95-100<sup>0</sup>F, and a cooler area around 85<sup>0</sup>F. If the cage temperature is uniform, then aim at 87-90<sup>0</sup>F as an ideal temperature. Keep the temperature at least 75-80<sup>0</sup>F at night. A reptile heat pad placed under the terrarium (or attached to the back wall) 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; dim purple coated night bulbs may also be used. Monitor cage temperature at several spots with good mercury, digital, or dial type thermometers; avoid paper strip thermometers or temp guns which do not measure air temperature well.

Lighting requires special attention. You must provide both visible (white) light and ultraviolet light in the 280-320 nm spectrum (called UV-B), to mimic outdoor sun. Our climate provides too little sunlight, and window glass or plexiglass filters out most of the sun’s UV rays. Lack of proper lighting causes poor or picky appetites, poor growth, and bone disease. Provide correct lighting with a fluorescent “full spectrum” light. Reptisun (made by Zoo med) and Arcadia provide strong UV levels; other brands include, Reptile Daylight (Energy Savers Unlimited), Reptiglo, and

Reptasun (by Flukers). 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 won't 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 iguana to be effective). The bulb should run the entire length of the cage; UV tubes less than 24 inches long (including compact coils) are usually too weak to be effective. Avoid plastic or glass barriers between the light and the pet (these block UV). 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 bulbs; they produce high UV output and heat, so must be kept at a safe distance (at least 18-24 inches away). Their effective life span is uncertain; to be safe replace them yearly. They are most useful for big, tall cages (3 to 6 feet tall) where the bulb is away from the pet, and the light beam can expand out and cover large areas. These devices typically cost \$45-\$100, and 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 light bulbs, and do *not* produce good UV output.

Branches may be provided for the iguana to climb on. Do not trim nails on iguanas that climb high, as they may 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, etc. 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 UV light. Symptoms include weakness, tremors, soft jaw, swollen or crooked legs. Treatment is via injectable or oral calcium, and correction of diet and lighting.

**Limb fractures:** Due to trauma, or secondary to soft bones (rickets). The limb is usually splinted. Correcting 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 oral mineral oil. Severe cases may need surgery to remove the obstruction. Cool temperatures slow the bowel and increase risk of blockage or constipation.

**Heat burns/skin infections:** Unprotected hot rocks, heat pads or heat lights can cause burns. Burned skin often becomes infected. Bacterial or fungal infection can also result from lying in contaminated water or on soiled flooring. Treatment: for mild infections, chlorhexidine or Betadine solution applied 2-3 times daily for 5-10 days may be adequate. For severe lesions, dead tissue may need surgical removal followed by antibiotics. Correct the habitat also.

**Mouthrot and respiratory infections:** These are usually caused by normal bacteria which take advantage of a stressed or weakened iguana; 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 odor or drooling. Respiratory infections can cause mucus discharge in the mouth or nose which may resemble mouthrot, but the gums are usually normal. Both diseases are treated with antibiotics and correction of diet and environment. **NOTE:** Normal iguanas often sneeze and have a 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:** A common cause of death in older iguanas, it may be seen in pets as young as 5 years old if the diet or environment have been improper. The causes are poorly understood, but damage to the kidneys may be caused by aging, low temperatures, high protein diets, overdosing of calcium or vitamins, infection, dehydration, or other illness. Signs are variable and may include lethargy, tremors, weight loss, appetite loss, and color changes. This may resemble calcium deficiency (rickets), but rickets is more common in baby iguanas, whereas kidney failure is much more common in older pets. Treatment includes a low mineral, low protein diet and fluid therapy; most severe cases do not survive.

**Egg Binding (egg retention):** Female iguanas over 11-12 inches long (not including the tail) may produce eggs yearly, usually between February and April. They may become very bloated with egg follicles (unshelled eggs) and stop eating. The eggs may mature & be laid, or unshelled follicles may be reabsorbed. Failure to reabsorb or lay the eggs may result in weight loss and eventual death. Some egg retention is behavioral; iguanas may refuse to lay them unless provided an "underground" chamber. In captivity a closed dark box with a small entry often is 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. Retained eggs may need surgery to remove them; iguanas are usually spayed at the same time.