



TURTLE/TORTOISE CARE SHEET

There are a number of different turtle (or tortoise) species that are commonly kept in Australia. The term turtle or tortoise is often used interchangeably (as it will be in this article) as the meaning differs depending on who you ask and where they are from.

They can make fantastic pets but are not always the easiest to care for. It is very important that you do your research before getting a turtle and make sure that their environment is set up correctly and that they are getting all their nutritional requirements. Appropriate ultraviolet (UV) light and adequate amounts of calcium in their diet are especially important. They also require a good filter to ensure that their water stays clean. Unless these requirements can be catered for then it is best that turtles not be kept as we see many problems arise.

Each species has specific differences in how they should be kept however general recommendations are as follows:

OUTDOOR HOUSING: For adult turtles, outdoor housing with supplementary heating where necessary is preferable if the species is found locally. This suits their larger size and aquatic lifestyle. Most importantly for good health, it is essential that both sunshine and shade are available to your turtle when in the water and on land. Ensure that no rough edges exist on the bottom and sides of concrete enclosures. It is recommended that a shade cloth or bird netting aviary-like cover be used to exclude predators. Enclosures must be secure and escape proof.



INDOOR HOUSING: Adults can be kept indoors, although this is often more challenging. Juveniles can be kept in a suitably sized glass vivarium with access to both land and water. A basking light is required over a basking site such as a submerged rock or log. UV light is very important for juvenile turtles' healthy development, so use full spectrum UV fluorescent lighting for around 10-14 hours per day depending on the season. This needs to be replaced at least every six months to maintain its effectiveness. There are a few different options when it comes to UV lighting and it will greatly depend on the size of your cage, for further information on what light source would be most appropriate for your cage please contact us.

WATER: A 40cm plus deep body of water about 100 x 150cm with a dry land area is ideal for one or two adults. Any additional turtles should be met with a corresponding increase in pond





size. The enclosure wall should be smooth and at least 50 cm below ground and 100 cm high. Loose soil or preferably a pile of loose dry leaf litter and a number of appropriate hides should be made available to allow for brumation (hibernation) during cooler months. This will also provide shelter if needed. A ramp or partially submerged log should be appropriately positioned to allow tortoises and turtles to leave the pond if they wish. The water in your turtle's cage must not be left to stagnate as this can increase the risk of infections occurring. It is recommended that a water pump and bio-filter are used and that 10-20% water changes as well as water quality analysis are completed weekly. Changing a higher percentage of water can predispose to changes in water quality that may lead to other health complications.

FOOD: Turtles can be voracious feeders on raw meat, insects, earthworms, crickets, small mice and fish. If using a calcium deficient food such as raw meat, regular dusting with a calcium/vitamin supplement is needed. It is best to provide a range of fresh foods where possible. Small fish such as *Gambusia* are perfect, and freshwater crayfish can sometimes be introduced to large ponds as a food source. Freshwater crayfish may be obtained from a pet store or caught from the wild with a fisher license. They normally take food only in the water; however, in time, they will often take food from tongs or tweezers. Adults should be fed 1-2 times per week with juveniles requiring more frequent feeding and much smaller food items such as live water fleas (*Daphnia*), mosquito larvae, brine shrimp and other small insects. Small fish and crustaceans are also ideal. Any uneaten dead food should be removed as quickly as possible as it can lead to problems with water quality if left in the water. Food variety is very important and feeding your turtle solely on turtle blocks or meat can cause a life threatening medical issues.

CAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR/BREEDING: Turtles usually do well in captivity once they have become accustomed to their new environment. After any handling always wash your hands in warm soapy water. Sex determination is sometimes difficult, but males generally have a curved plastron (lower shell) and longer tail. Females tend to be larger, but this is not always the case. All turtles lay eggs. Juveniles should not be housed with adults and only similar sized animals can be housed together.

HEALTH PROBLEMS: Reptiles in general are very good at hiding their health problems and may only show symptoms when they are seriously ill. For this reason, it is very important that you get your turtle/tortoise checked up by an experienced reptile veterinarian every 6-12 months.





Common problems where veterinary advice is recommended are lumps, inappetance, skin disease, lameness, lethargy, abnormal movement, and regurgitation.

QUARANTINE: The length of quarantine is a contentious area with many different protocols implemented across the world. A general recommendation for most turtle species is at least 90 days. This may change and increase as our understanding of reptile diseases and viruses increases. Quarantined animals should be kept in a separate room with no shared contact or airspace. Any handling, feeding or cleaning of the cages should be completed last after all the other non-quarantined animals. If further work needs to be done with the rest of the collection after the animals in quarantine then a complete change of clothes and a thorough disinfection of hands and any equipment used is recommended.

If you have any other questions please don't hesitate to contact us.

