

Care and Feeding of Insectivorous Reptiles

Insectivorous reptiles eat entirely or mostly insects. There are many such lizards, including water dragons, anoles, chameleons, toads, basilisks, geckos and most skinks. The most common causes of illness in these reptiles are unsanitary enclosures, temperatures that are too warm or consistently too cool and poor diet.

Food

Although reptiles in the wild eat a huge variety of exotic and unusual insect prey, most pets do well on our most commonly available insects, mealworms and crickets. These insects can be supplemented with insects found outdoors, including grasshoppers and moths. Do not feed lightning bugs, spiders, wasps or other potentially toxic insects.

Prey should be “gut loaded” or fed very high quality meals 48 hours before feeding so that the digestive tract of the insect is full of nutrients. Insects can be fed commercial gut loading formulas, or high quality ground dog food mixed with calcium supplement. Even with gut loading, most experts agree these insects are still deficient in calcium and some vitamins. Therefore, prey should be dusted with a calcium and vitamin supplement just prior to feeding.

Supplements

A wide variety of supplements are available in pet stores, and they range in quality from good to extremely poor. The reptile owner should discuss exactly what supplements are recommended with a veterinarian specializing in the care of reptiles, or with experienced herpetologists.

Only offer as many insects as the reptile will eat at once. Insects left in the reptile’s cage will shake off the supplement, resulting in deficiencies, especially in growing or reproducing reptiles. Reptiles require a source of UV-B light to metabolize vitamin D. Purchase good quality UV-B bulbs, or allow the reptile access to direct unfiltered sunlight (through a screen, not through glass). Discuss which type of light is appropriate for your species.

Husbandry

Many recommendations exist for housing for reptiles. It is best to research the natural habitat of the reptile in the wild, and duplicate it as closely as possible. Most common pet reptiles do well in an aquarium-type setting with newspaper or washable reptile carpet (similar to outdoor carpeting). Cage furniture can include branches, hide boxes, and rocks. Sand, bark or other substrates have been used successfully. However, these beddings are occasionally eaten by reptiles, which can result in mild to severe illness.

Provide reptiles with a temperature gradient; a hot basking spot; and a cooler area. Most reptiles do well at 80-90 degrees, with a basking spot near 100 degrees. Use heat-only or night bulbs to keep the temperature above 75 degrees at night. Purchase two good quality thermometers, one for the hot spot and one for the cool area. Do not rely on feeling the enclosure air with your hand to gauge temperature. Reptiles from tropical regions require more humidity, while desert species require less. Large shallow bowls of water, humidifiers or frequent misting can raise the humidity for tropical species.

Equipment/supplies for insectivorous reptiles:

Glass or Plexiglas enclosure with secure lid	Night heat lamp
Daytime heat lamp (ceramic heat lamp)	2 thermometers for hot and cool
UV-B lamp (most of these do not provide heat)	Source of healthy, well fed insects
Calcium supplement and vitamin supplement	Reptile carpet or bedding
Optional: appliance timer to automatically switch from night to day heat sources	

The Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital recommends your reptile receive a yearly health examination from an experienced exotic animal veterinarian.

*All information listed here is generalized, and your veterinarian can give species specific information.