



Pet Kare Clinic

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“Happy Pets, Happy People”

Green Iguana Care

from Midwest Bird & Exotic Animal Hospital

The green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) is one of the most frequently purchased reptiles, but is unfortunately also the most frequently seen reptile in the veterinary office due to disease caused by inadequate diet and husbandry. Often you, the owner, is not given proper information as to the needs of the iguana at the time the pet is acquired and it may be weeks to months before the devastating effects of improper diet, internal parasites or incorrect housing conditions take their toll, and the pet becomes ill. This handout provides a very brief overview of iguanas and their needs, but we highly recommend that you purchase a copy of The General Care and Maintenance of the Green Iguana by Philippe de Vosjoli which is an invaluable source of detailed information.

Iguana are diurnal, arboreal, tropical lizards of Central and South America. They have been introduced into south Florida, and are bred in captivity with increasing frequency (although primarily in Central America). In the wild, iguanas are virtually herbivorous, eating fibrous jungle leaves, flowers and fruits. They rely on fermentation of complex carbohydrates in their colon to produce 30 to 40% of the energy available from their diet. The required bacteria are acquired in hatchlings by eating the feces of adult iguanas. Iguanas facilitate this fermentation process and regulate their body temperature by basking in the sun, seeking temperatures above 85 degrees F (30 degrees C). Their social rank is reflected in the prominence of their basking sites. *Adult animals may reach a length of 6 feet and weigh as much as 15 pounds*, a fact which should be considered when purchasing that cute little green lizard in the pet store! Adult animals require a large amount of cage space and may be quite dangerous to handle. Their razor sharp teeth can inflict serious injuries and the tail when lashed can also cause skin lacerations or eye injuries (not to mention their sharp claws)!

HOUSING

Providing the proper temperature, humidity and light requirements for an iguana is critical if the animal is to survive in captivity. Iguanas should be housed in large glass, plexiglass or wooden cages. A 20 gallon or larger aquarium is a good size to start with as these reptiles grow at a very rapid rate in their first several months of life. The cage should be lined with newspaper, artificial grass (astro-turf), or indoor-outdoor carpet, with ease of cleaning being the most important consideration. Do not use gravel, sand, soil or kitty litter because the iguana may eat pieces of these materials and then develop

Cage mates are NOT recommended. Iguanas are not social animals and the presence of a cage mate may result in serious injury or death. Another phenomenon that has been seen is the less dominant of the two iguanas will not grow properly and will be more sickly than the dominant animal even in the presence of abundant food and a good environment.

DIET

This is the single most difficult area to manage in the pet iguana. The most common disease problem that we see in pet iguanas is calcium and/or vitamin D deficiency which leads to stunted growth, softened and broken bones, muscle tremors, seizures and death. Juvenile iguanas have different dietary requirements than adult iguanas, and this whole subject is still a basis for much discussion. There are not available on the market various pelleted, ground and frozen iguana diets, many claiming to be “complete.” It is dangerous to use any of these foods as the total diet because dietary deficiencies are still seen even with their growing claims. If

prepackaged diets are used, they should comprise no more than 75% of the total diet with the remaining 25% fed in the form of plant material (see examples of plant material below). Vitamin and mineral supplementation may be eliminated altogether because the prepackaged diets already contain these materials.

If you are making up a diet of your own, you may want to follow these guidelines. (Again, we urge you to consults The General Care and Maintenance of the Green Iguana by Philippe de Vosjoli for additional suggestions).

Juvenile "baby" iguanas (less than a foot in length from nose to vent – exclude the tail) can be fed a diet of 20% plant protein along with a variety of leafy vegetables, non-leafy vegetables and fruits. They should be fed daily.

Medium "adolescent" iguanas (1-1½ foot in length from nose to vent – exclude the tail) can be fed about 15% protein and the rest as in the juvenile. These should still be fed daily.

Large adult iguanas (1½ foot in length from nose to vent – exclude the tail or any time growth has stopped) can be fed 10% protein in the diet. Some adult pets may only eat 2 to 3 times a week. Concentrate on the leafy veggies and limit high phosphorus foods (those with an asterisk on the calcium chart included in this handout).

All food should be chopped up in small pieces and mixed well and fed only in amounts that will be eaten within a few hours to ensure that ALL foods are eaten and ALL the supplements are taken in.

Examples of protein foods: Tofu, rabbit guinea pig or alfalfa pellets (put into a blender dry, grounds into a powder and sprinkled over the food), wheat grass and alfalfa sprouts. **WE NO LONGER RECOMMENED USING ANIMAL PROTEIN SUCH AS DOG FOOD OR TROUT CHOW IN THE GREEN IGUANA DIET.** Although the use of animal protein has caused rapid growth as a youngster, it is now one of the factors suspected of causing kidney disease as the animal ages.

Examples of plant material: Use at least 50% of the plant material as dark green leafy vegetables such as mustard greens, dandelion greens, kale, swiss chard, endive, romaine lettuce, carrot tops, endive, turnip and beet greens. This is to satisfy not only the dietary fiber requirements but also the calcium requirements. One should use a MINIMUM of