Public Education

Turtle Care

Aquatic turtles do not enjoy being handled frequently. Pet parents of new turtles should give them a few days to adjust to their new homes prior to handling them. Reptiles are potential carriers of infectious diseases which can be transmitted to people. Therefore, owners and others should wash their hands prior to and after touching the turtle or its habitat.

Aquatic turtles should be seen by a veterinarian at least once a year for a physical exam, fecal testing, and blood work. Although turtles tend to hide illnesses, common turtle illnesses exist as well as symptoms which would require veterinarian attention.

Common Turtle Illnesses

- Bladder stones
- Tissue prolapse from vent (such as bladder, uterus, penis, intestines, or cloaca [the common outlet for waste and reproductive fluids])
- Metabolic bone disease
- Shell fracture or trauma
- Egg binding (being unable to pass eggs)
- Loss of appetite (not eating)
- Abscesses
- Shell rot
- Respiratory disease
- Foreign body ingestion

Turtle Illness Symptoms

- Swollen, sunken, closed eyes, or eyes with discharge
- Ulcers, abrasions, swelling, bumps, or discoloration (e.g., redness) on the skin

- Lethargy or hiding behavior
- Loss of appetite (not eating)
- Nasal discharge or bubbles, difficulty breathing
- Difficulty moving, standing, or walking
- Divots, defects, discoloration, or trauma to the shell
- Diarrhea, constipation, straining, or difficulty urinating or defecating
- Discharge or prolapse (protrusion of tissue) from the vent
- Signs of trauma or injury

Shedding: Aquatic turtles will naturally shed their scutes (the shield-like keratin plates on a turtle's shell) throughout their lifetime. To encourage healthy shedding, be sure to maintain proper water conditions in the tank and provide adequate calcium in the turtle's diet. If you notice any deformities or signs of damage on a turtle's shell, such as scrapes, scratches, dents, or soft spots, these should be addressed by a veterinarian.

Beak Care: Instead of teeth, turtles have a rigid "beak" at the front of their mouth, which they use to break down food. Most turtles do not require beak trimming, as it should wear down gradually with daily use. Consult a veterinarian if your turtle's beak looks overgrown (hanging past its jawline) or misshapen, if the turtle has difficulty opening and closing its mouth, or if it is dropping food. Never try to trim your turtle's beak on your own.

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