

Common Ailments of Water Dragons in Captivity

Information for the Pet Reptile Owner

•**Internal Parasites**

Seen mainly in wild caught water dragons- Parasite load is generally worsened by poor import and pet trade conditions. Internal parasites in a newly acquired reptile who may be stressed and suffering from other ailments can become opportunistic and overwhelm the animal causing lethargy, lack of, or decreased, appetite, and failure to thrive. I believe it to be one of the leading causes of death in newly acquired animals. Please see Purchasing a Water Dragon for further information.

•**Metabolic Bone Disease (Hypocalcemia or hypercalcemia)**

Causes include poor diet, inadequate UVB and/or heat. For more information see the MBD page

•**Rostral/Snout Damage**

Generally seen in Wild caught dragons that have been hurt during importation, or in water dragons that have been kept in either too small enclosures, or glass walled enclosures. Snout damage and banging can lead to infection, mouthrot and major tissue damage. Severe injury can result in tissue being rubbed off, and even bone infection and bone death. The tissue and bone will not grow back if it is damaged. Preventing snout rubbing behavior is the key to preventing such damage.

•**Stomatitis (Mouthrot)**

Most often seen in water dragons with snout damage, or systemic infection due to improper environment or stress. Please see the "Stomatitis (Mouthrot) Page. If this ailment is not taken care of properly at home or by a vet using prescribed medications it can lead to systemic infection and death.

•**Swollen/Infected Limbs**

Usually a sign of MBD or fractures due to MBD, or getting caught in inappropriate tank set-ups. Please see diet, Lighting, and The Enclosure.

•**Articular/Periarticular/Pseudo Gout**

Water dragons that are affected with this ailment will have hard swellings of the joint or digits that may eventually involve the entire hand or foot. Deformities may eventually occur that will result in problems that prevent normal movement. This ailment seems to occur most often in male water dragons. No effective treatment has been found at this time. It is thought that a varied diet and the provision of clean water on a regular basis may prevent this disorder. I have written a page with more information about this disorder. Please visit my gout page.

•**Gastroenteritis**

Symptoms include loss of weight, listlessness, loss of appetite, and diarrhea. If your dragon exhibits these symptoms please take it to a veterinarian to have it's stools checked for protozoan, bacterial or worm infections. Your dragon could die if this is left untreated. Please see Purchasing a Water Dragon for further information.

•**Respiratory Infection**

Respiratory infections are usually caused by inadequate heat, and by being kept under stressful conditions. Reptiles often do a good job of not demonstrating obvious signs of



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illness until a disease has progressed to the point that it cannot be easily treated. Signs and symptoms of respiratory infections include reduced appetite, listlessness, swollen appearance of the body, and as the infection progresses gaping followed by occasional forced exhalations. If you suspect that your water dragon has a respiratory infection he should be taken to the vet, who will probably place him on antibiotics, and the cage temperature should be increased to 85 - 88 F around the clock until the symptoms subside.

•**Egg Binding-Dystocia**

A small percentage of female water dragons suffer from egg binding or dystocia. If you have a female water dragon or suspect that you have you should read the dystocia document, as all female water dragons are able to produce eggs whether they have a male companion or not, and if they can become gravid they can become egg bound. Adequate housing and temperatures, diet, calcium supplementation, exercise and the provision of an egg laying box during the breeding season (December to June- sometimes even longer) will go a long way towards preventing this serious ailment.

•**Mite and Tick infestation**

Mite and tick infestation is a common problem with water dragons, and other herps for that matter, that have been kept in poor conditions during shipping, and while being kept in the pet shop. When you bring your new dragon home there is a very high possibility that it may in fact have some ticks and or mites on it. If ticks and mites are allowed to flourish they can become quite difficult to eradicate, and may in fact stress your dragon to the point of it's becoming ill, not to mention that a very bad infestation of mites and ticks on your dragon could cause quite a severe blood loss. Please see the Mite and Tick eradication Page for further details.

•**Fungal or bacterial infections**

Occasionally a water dragon may be purchased whose skin is infected by a fungal or bacterial growth. Fungal and bacterial infections are usually caused by being kept in too damp and enclosure and living in a poorly cleaned cage where fungi and bacteria can grow and spread in the warm moist conditions that they love.

The affected area's may have darkened swollen scales that are discolored. Two of my dragons had a fungal infection when purchased and they had several dark brown swollen (almost appeared fluid filled) scales on their underside and tails. The scales may be lifted and or damaged in areas (Keep in mind that scale damage could also be caused by mites, ticks and or crickets in the enclosure).

If you suspect that your dragon has a fungal or bacterial infection you should take it to a qualified reptile vet for diagnosis. The vet will likely give you an antibiotic or antifungal cream to apply to the affected areas. Clean the enclosure thoroughly disinfecting branches and the water container with a mild bleach solution. Replace the substrate and any other cage furniture that is easily replaceable in order to limit the spread of infection. In conjunction with a topical antibacterial or antifungal ointment the dragon may be bathed in 80-85F chest deep water that has betadine (enough betadine to make the water a med. tea colour) in it for a half an hour per day for a couple of weeks.

•**Toe, Spike or end of tail damage and loss**

Darkening of, obvious damage to, and loss of toes, spikes and the end of the tail can be the result of a number of problems.



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Improper Shedding can result in the skin becoming stuck to a toe, spike or the end of the tail. If the skin remains stuck onto the appendage while the tissue below continues to grow the circulation to the area may become decreased and lead to dry gangrene, infection, and death of the tissue.

Breaks from falls or becoming stuck in tight areas can result in broken toes, or the end of the tail snapping off. The end of the tail may also snap off if grabbed in an effort to keep the struggling animal from getting away, or may even drop suddenly when the animal is frightened by something (although this last is least likely to occur with water dragons).

It is always wise to take your reptile in for a visit to the vet if there has been an unexplained fracture of the toe, foot or leg (for the animals sake!) because the break could be a sign and symptom of a more serious ailment such as Metabolic bone disease (often calcium deficiency). If your reptile is suffering from MBD it is best to catch it in the early stages before it becomes so serious as to cause irreparable damage (bent crooked back, misaligned jaw!) or death.



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