

Pacman Frog Not Eating

Pacman frog not eating, could be a result of hibernation or estivation.

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Q. I got my pacman frog from an owner. He has been with the owner since he was a baby. From when he was a baby, the owner fed him baby mice and then baby chicks as he got older. I asked my local vet about this and the bad thing about this is, if the chicken had feathers on him, which he did, the frog's intestines might rupture. The owner fed him the baby chicken in November of last year, and I have him now which is July. He has not eaten anything since I acquired him. He has hard skin and he burrows a lot. He might go into hibernation. I just want to know how the pacman frog hibernates and any more information about this species if you have the time to do so.

A. Let's start at the beginning. You acquired this Argentine Horned Frog, also called an Ornate, Pacman or Bell, Horned frog, *Ceratophrys ornata*, from another owner who has had it since it was a baby. You said that he fed him baby chicks. Did he do that more than once or did he only feed it a chick once, and then you acquired it?

First, let me put your mind at ease about the chicks. The pacman frog is meant to eat rodents, birds, fish and even other frogs. So, the information that you were given telling you that the frog's intestines might rupture from ingesting feathers is incorrect. The frog's digestive tract can handle fur and feathers, as long as it is being kept at the correct temperature for proper digestion, so don't worry about that.

Next, your pacman frog is currently in a state of partial hibernation, called estivation. This usually occurs when the temperature is too hot or too cold for the frog's comfort. With pacman frogs, it may also occur for reasons that we don't know. When undergoing estivation, the frog doesn't shed its skin and instead retains it. The skin then hardens up and encases the frog in a protective layer. Underneath, there is a thin layer of moisture and the frog will continue to take in oxygen through the skin, as the nostrils are often occluded by the thickened, hardened skin. It is best to not disturb a frog that is in this state. A frog in estivation will not eat or drink and will attempt to bury itself in the tank substrate. When it feels ready, it will "awaken" and slough off the hardened skin, and then it will begin moving around and start looking for a meal.

I wonder if you were keeping the pacman frog warm enough? These frogs will go into estivation if they aren't kept warm. They should be kept between 77 and 88 degrees Fahrenheit, and most people accomplish this by putting a heating pad on low under the tank or by applying a heat strip under the tank that is made for herps. While heating pads are often employed by herpers for supplying heat, they are not made to be kept on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can pose a fire hazard. Also, I never recommend using tap water for amphibians, unless you can adequately remove chlorine and chloramines from it prior to using it for frogs.

I would recommend increasing the temperature in the tank IF you have been keeping it at room temperature so far. Monitor the temperature by attaching a digital aquarium thermometer strip about one inch above the bottom of the tank. The air temperature should be kept around 81 degrees Fahrenheit. If the tank doesn't have sphagnum moss for it to dig in, then you should also supply herp-safe moss that has been dampened for it to bury into. Live plants can also be placed in the tank to supply hiding places and this will also help keep the humidity up, which is important. You should also provide a fluorescent light that emits UVB light. The light should only remain on for nine to 12 hours per day. Any longer and you risk sending your frog into estivation or it might just stop eating. Fluorescent lights are preferred as the heat emitted from incandescent bulbs can dry out the frog's skin. An appropriate sized saucer of water should be provided for your frog to sit or soak in. Do not handle your frog at all while it has the thickened skin. And actually, frogs are not the type of pet that should be handled, anyway, unless it is necessary for cleaning the tank, for example. But, it is especially important for you to not handle the frog while in this state.

Your pacman frog should come out of estivation if you improve its conditions. (I am assuming that you have been keeping it at room temperature since you acquired it.) Once it is warmer, and it looks and acts normally, you should make an appointment with a vet familiar with amphibians (and it may be difficult to find a vet who is well-versed in frogs). An alternative would be to find a vet who is willing to see your frog, even if he or she is not experienced in dealing with them, and ask if that vet would be willing to have a consultation with a veterinary consultant affiliated with a veterinary diagnostic laboratory. Most large veterinary diagnostic labs offer a consultation service at no charge to assist vets in situations just as this. This may be the best way to deal with your frog.

Once things are back to normal with your pacman frog, I would recommend just feeding appropriate sized rodents (either pre-killed or frozen/thawed), such as mice or rats. I hope that your frog hasn't been in estivation for so long that it has lost a significant amount of weight or has developed a bacterial infection. That would make recovery more difficult and could possibly even be life-threatening. Your frog has been in semi-hibernation for way too long now. So, let's make the environmental changes and see what happens. Good luck with your frog. I hope he "wakes" up and recovers completely for you.

Need a Herp Vet?

If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking our comprehensive list of reptile vets. Or, check the list of members on the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarian (ARAV) web site at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.