

Bearded Dragon With Swollen, Irritated Beard

Why would my bearded dragon get a swollen, irritated beard?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

We have two bearded dragons, a male and a female, approximately 8 years old. They have always been in very good health. Recently the female has developed puffiness under her chin. She has a good appetite and looks healthy, though she is very inactive. I noticed the change after she ate an outside plant last week. We have varied her diet and she gets plenty of fruit, greens and calcium supplement, crickets and mealworms. Her cage is kept clean. They get the required heat also. We leave the lid open to the cage and they climb out and down to the floor. It is possible she may have injured herself. We took her to the vet. He wasn't very educated on herps. He felt her belly, looked in her mouth and said he thought something was wrong but couldn't say what. That was a week ago. She doesn't seem to be terribly ill, but something is definitely wrong. I am enclosing a picture to help.

The male has also been trying to mate with her and she usually lays eggs in the spring, up to 20 at a time. She has not laid any eggs yet this year. Any advice would be greatly appreciated. We live in an area that has no herp specialists. Thank You.

As I have mentioned in many of my previous columns, please ask your herp vet to contact the veterinary diagnostic lab that he uses and set up a consultation to speak with an experienced herp veterinarian regarding your beardie. This service is offered at no charge to vets using the lab. I would recommend blood tests (CBC and chemistry panel), fecal parasite examination and radiographs (X-rays) in order to attempt to determine what is wrong with her. If your herp vet is not familiar with these procedures, the consultant can offer advice on how to draw blood safely and where radiographs may be sent for evaluation by a specialist. There are several sources that have a data base of "normals" for the different blood values for bearded dragons.

I recommend that you separate your two lizards at this time, as your female does not need the stress of the male trying to breed with her. Also, you will be better able to monitor her food consumption and behavior without having the male pestering her. Soak her in a clear, warm sports drink for 10 to 15 minutes twice daily for now, so that she can drink the fluid, which will provide her with sugars, electrolytes and other carbohydrates. Make sure that you can monitor her the entire time she is being soaked and make sure the fluid is shallow enough so that she cannot drown.

I'm not sure why you keep the lid to her habitat open, so that your lizards can wander around your house and garden. This means that you don't have control of their environment at all times. She could have easily ingested a toxic piece of something or injured herself in a fall. Also, beardies require a habitat with a focal hot spot of up to 110 to 115 degrees Fahrenheit for basking in order to properly maintain themselves in optimal health, and to digest their food properly. You also didn't say if they have a full-spectrum light that is placed at the correct distance and is changed at the manufacturer's recommended intervals. Please check my archived answers for detailed information on bearded dragon husbandry.

I recommend that a portion (about one-third) of the diet be composed of a name brand bearded dragon pelleted diet, in addition to offering insects, the occasional pinkie and healthy veggies (with fruits offered sparingly as a treat or top-dressing to entice it to eat). Gut-loading or dusting insects is always a good idea.

Beardies may develop increased pigmentation to the skin, especially of the beard, as a response to anger, fear or some illnesses. From what I can tell from the photos that you sent, it looks like the beard is pigmented and swollen. This is most likely cellulitis or edema, two conditions that can cause the tissue to swell. An experienced herp vet can advise you on what this could be, based on hands-on palpation, examination of the oral cavity, fine needle aspiration of fluid and tissue from the area, and from other tests. I recommend that you ask your herp vet to consult with a more experienced herp vet through his diagnostic lab to assist him with your case.

If the vet that you took her to doesn't feel comfortable in performing the diagnostic tests that I have recommended, perhaps you can ask him for a referral to a more experienced herp vet or larger veterinary referral center so that your lizard can be properly diagnosed. Your vet should not be upset if you request a referral.

I hope this is helpful.

Need a Herp Vet?



If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking 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.