

Bearded Dragon Supplements

What kind of calcium and vitamins should I give to my bearded dragon?

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Q. I have a question about bearded dragons. I was reading *The Bearded Dragon Manual* by Philippe de Vosjoli. He said that beardies should get two supplements — calcium and vitamin. I found a calcium supplement made of mostly calcium carbonate and read the ingredients on several containers of reptile vitamins.

I am confused about what kinds of vitamins are important for adult beardies, as well as the amount in which they should have them. Also, are there any extra vitamins baby beardies should have, or do they just need different quantities?

A. Good questions! When it comes to supplements, the information out there can become very confusing, can't it? First, we need to understand that no one knows for sure exactly what the nutritional requirements are, and in what amounts, for all herps, including bearded dragons, at this time. Most of the information on nutrients and supplements comes from researchers or herpers who kept bearded dragons and found nutritional problems that they were able to correct by adding certain nutrients or supplements. Also, vets, herpetologists and researchers have studied the natural diets of herps in the wild to try to approximate their nutritional requirements in captivity.

The supplements generally recommended for bearded dragons include calcium (and calcium carbonate is a fine choice) and Vitamin D3, which is the vitamin necessary for proper uptake and utilization of calcium. Vitamin D3 is somewhat controversial, as there is a question about whether or not Vitamin D3 is absorbed well when given orally. There are several different types of Vitamin D available, some of plant origin and some of animal origin. The Vitamin D supplement that you should look for on the label is cholecalciferol. Animals that are exposed to ultraviolet light (especially the UVB portion of the spectrum) make Vitamin D3 in the skin for utilization. However, animals that do not receive natural sunlight (not filtered through glass or plastic) or those housed indoors permanently, even if they are supplied with a full-spectrum light, would benefit from the addition of a Vitamin D supplement.

Without adequate levels of Vitamin D and calcium, young beardies can suffer from metabolic bone disease, pathologic fractures of long bones, skeletal deformities, seizing and other signs of low blood calcium levels. Adult beardies still require calcium, but not as much as growing babies and juveniles. In the diet, the calcium-phosphorus ratio should be 1.5 to 2 to 1. Fruits, in general, have an incorrect calcium-phosphorus ratio, and usually have too much phosphorus and not enough calcium. As a supplement, calcium is available in many different forms. Cuttlebone is a good source of calcium. One of my favorite sources of calcium is Tums, a fruit-flavored chewable, palatable tablet that is cost-effective and easy to acquire.

If you are feeding your beardies a varied diet of gut-loaded crickets, mealworms, superworms, waxworms, the occasional pinky mouse (for adults) and other insects, plus appropriate vegetables, plants, flowers and a small amount of fruit, your beardies should fare well. However, because all animals seem to have their preferences and will pick and choose certain food items, one cannot always be sure that their diet is balanced. For that reason, supplements are often recommended. It is always best to consult your herp veterinarian for a specific dosing regime. As a general rule, using four parts calcium supplement to one part multivitamin supplement sprinkled on the food three times a week is a good guideline.

A multiple vitamin supplement provides several vitamins, amino acids and trace minerals. Some supplements contain Vitamin A, which can be toxic if overdosed. Beardies seem particularly sensitive to Vitamin A toxicosis. Supplements containing beta-carotene and/or carotenoids are much safer for beardies, as beta-carotene is nontoxic and is converted to Vitamin A as needed by the body, and the rest is excreted unchanged. So beta-carotene is much safer than Vitamin A, in general, in supplements.

In addition to feeding insects, vegetables, flowers and some fruits, it is wise to offer juvenile beardies pellets developed for bearded dragons as a portion of the regular diet, as this should have balanced nutrients for a growing lizard. Adult beardies should also be offered pellets. To encourage babies to try the pellets, they can be moistened with water, fruit juice or a sport's drink. If beardies are consuming pellets as a portion of their diet, they may not require a supplement at all, as the pellets contain what is thought to be a balanced blend of nutrients. But, as always, I would recommend consulting with your herp vet regarding the needs of your specific herps.