

Treating a Lizard Limb Fracture or Swollen Limb

Should the reptile's leg be immobilized before going to the vet?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

About the only problem I have with "Ask the Vet" is that it comes out only once a month.

I recently purchased two young bearded dragons. I had thought that their only problem was that a larger littermate had chomped their tails. After I got them home, I also noticed that one has a swollen left foot and lower leg. I'll likely have them both to the vet before you reply, as the other one appears to have dry gangrene in its tail stump. I was curious: If I see something like this again, should I immobilize the limb until the vet can see it? And how should this be done?

I am somewhat chagrined to tell you that my column is a weekly column, and not monthly. However, due to my annual family vacation, Hurricane Charley and Hurricane Frances, I have not been able to meet my weekly writing duties consistently. However, from now on, expect to see my words of wisdom appearing online weekly.

When a limb injury is noticed, the less manipulation, the better. Unless you see a bone protruding through the skin or you notice obvious laxity to a joint, it is probably best to keep your herp in a confined place, so that it can't injure itself further by moving around too much. If a bone is protruding through the skin or the joint is obviously very loose, then you should possibly consider immobilizing the limb until you can take your herp in to see a vet.

The main goal would be to simply limit any movement to the area. I don't recommend splinting it, or trying to use any sort of tongue depressor to stabilize it. The safest way to handle an open fracture or dislocation is to gently wrap the area with a generous amount of cotton batting (first covering any open wound with a nonstick pad). Then cover the cotton with Vetrap, which is a stretch-wrap that sticks to itself. The cotton combined with the wrap will sufficiently immobilize a fracture or dislocation until you can seek professional help. Make sure that you don't make it too tight, as it might cut off the circulation. Check the toes frequently to make sure that they are not swelling from a too-tight bandage.

If a wound has a bone protruding through the skin, the area should be cleaned and flushed. You can use sterile saline; a great source is contact lens saline, without preservatives. Use the squirt bottle to gently, yet thoroughly, flush out the wound, to remove any sand, dirt or debris. If you have hydrogen peroxide, you can then flush the wound with that once. There is a controversy going on today about using peroxide in wounds, as it causes some tissue destruction. You can also use povidone iodine solution (not scrub, which foams), trade name Betadyne, diluted to iced tea color with warm water, to flush the wound and to disinfect it. Never mix povidone iodine with hydrogen peroxide, as this mixture can cause an explosion!

When in doubt about whether or not to immobilize a limb, it would be best to call your herp veterinarian and ask for advice concerning your specific situation. I think it is a good idea for everyone to know the basics about first aid for herps in case you ever need to use it. But when in doubt, contact your herp vet for specific instructions.

Good luck with your little beardies.