

## Euthanizing a Reptile

### How do you euthanize a reptile?

*By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP*

Q. I have a red-eared slider that I might have to euthanize, and I was wondering how exactly is that done on reptiles? I have tried to find information on the Internet about putting down reptiles, but I can not find a direct answer. I would really like to know ahead of time so I can prepare myself. I think I saw something on the Internet to the effect the reptiles should be frozen? Can you please clarify what will be done?

A. You have asked a very insightful question, and I am happy to be able to put your mind at ease by answering this important query.

There are many ways available for herp vets to safely and humanely euthanize a pet reptile. This is one area of veterinary medicine that is very different, yet very important, when compared to human medicine. We, as vets, can euthanize an animal to alleviate suffering.

Some owners ask to be present at the euthanasia procedure; others prefer to remember their pet as it was, alive. This is a matter that should be discussed with your herp vet prior to making the final decision.

Many vets provide a pre-euthanasia sedative prior to actually performing the procedure to calm the animal down. This injection usually takes about 20 minutes to take effect. During that time, many owners say their goodbyes and then allow their vet to take their pet into the back room for the administration of the final injection that euthanizes the animal.

Let's now discuss the humane methods of euthanasia. Freezing a live reptile is controversial, and some owners who don't have ready access to a vet have employed this method. It is thought that herps may feel pain as ice crystals form in the tissues during the freezing process. I don't recommend this method.

Decapitation has been utilized as a method of euthanizing herps. While this may be effective for small herps, it is thought that the brain may still be able to perceive pain for up to an hour after the spinal cord has been severed. (Makes you wonder what humans felt after being beheaded via guillotine.) It has been recommended that anesthesia be utilized prior to the decapitation process.

Large herps, such as alligators, may be euthanized with the use of a captive bolt stun gun or a regular gun. The bullet should be aimed at the brain. Of course, this should only be done by a trained professional, and one must always remember to follow any laws regarding the discharge of firearms in towns, counties or states.

Veterinarians have access to euthanasia solutions that are injected into the animal, usually via a vein. In general, euthanasia solutions contain an anesthetic agent that is given in an overdose to completely anesthetize the brain, and then another chemical stops the heart. It is considered the most humane method for euthanizing an animal.

It can be problematic to easily access a vein in a herp, as compared to dogs and cats, for example. While it is usually considered best to inject the euthanasia solution directly into a vein, it can be injected into the heart or into the body cavity, called the coelom. If the solution is injected into a vein or directly into the heart, death comes quickly, as long as the heart is pumping effectively. If the solution is injected into the body cavity, it might take a bit longer for the solution to be absorbed, but the animal should slowly drift off to sleep and then the heart will stop.

This method is the kindest method of euthanasia for all herps. You should feel free to discuss euthanasia with your herp vet, and he or she should be able to answer any questions or concerns that you have.

I hope this information provides you with some peace of mind when trying to decide about having your turtle put to sleep.

Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP has been an avian/exotic/herp animal veterinarian since 1981. She is a regular contributor to REPTILES magazine.



### 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](http://www.arav.com). Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.