

General Reptile Care Guidelines

I would like for you to give me some advice on how to prevent my reptile from suddenly dying again.

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I purchased a leopard gecko for my son a few weeks ago and everything seemed to be going fine until this morning when I went home and found her dead. On her underbelly was a large greenish area and she smelled like poop. I am thinking maybe it was a bowel obstruction that resulted in a perforated bowel. I would like for you to give me some advice on how to prevent this from happening again if we get another one. My son is heartbroken. We fed her crickets, the smaller ones from the pet store, and I did notice retrospectively that she was not eating as much the last week we had her. Thank you in advance for your help.

-Dana, Alabama

I am so sorry that you had a bad experience with your son's first pet reptile. I am assuming that you didn't just purchase a leopard gecko and that you also purchased the proper set-up, complete with thermometer, appropriate tank substrate and a way to heat the enclosure.

Now, in regards to your discovery of the corpse, what you are describing is the normal appearance of a herp that has been dead for several hours and has either been kept at room temperature or in a heated enclosure. The large greenish area is seepage from the liver and bile from the gall bladder that have discolored the muscles and skin overlying those tissues.

Herps begin decomposition quite rapidly when not refrigerated, and that is why you noticed that strong odor and the greenish area on its underside. It doesn't mean that her bowel perforated, although to the untrained eye (and nose), it might appear to indicate a bowel problem. The only way that you would know for sure why it died (and did you know for certain that it was a girl?) would have been to have a necropsy (animal autopsy) performed by a reptile veterinarian plus whatever tests deemed necessary.

You mentioned that it was not eating well during the week before it died, but was that all? Did it have diarrhea or any other signs of a problem? A decreased appetite is one vague symptom of whatever was causing its problem. The list of things that could cause that is too long to describe. Substrate impaction, internal parasites, bacterial infection, reproductive problems, protozoal infection and trauma are just a few things that come to mind. Also, you didn't say how old your son is. I am not trying to imply that your son would intentionally harm his pet lizard, but was he always supervised during his interactions with it? Younger children might not always realize that improper handling could cause damage to a relatively delicate lizard like a leopard gecko.

Perhaps you can speak with the pet store manager or the breeder where you purchased your gecko and ask them about a replacement or perhaps a discount on another lizard? If your son is younger than eight, I might suggest that you consider a larger, more hardy lizard species, such as the bearded dragon. While they require a very specific temperature range (which can be easily provided with the correct equipment), if they are given a proper diet and set-up, they should thrive. The smaller geckos are not fragile creatures but they must be handled gently. While larger lizards, such as bearded dragons, also must be handled carefully, they do not have the delicate skin of geckos, for example. If you check back in the archives, I answered a question about suitable herps for children.

I hope that you were given information about proper husbandry and sanitation when you purchased your lizard. All herps should be considered capable of carrying infectious diseases that could be transmitted to humans. The Salmonella bacterium can be harbored by many species of animal, even if they show no outward signs of disease, so it is very important that children are taught to always wash their hands after handling their pet herp, and that they should never kiss their herp or hold it up to their face.

As insurance, when you acquire a new lizard, perhaps it would be better to schedule an appointment with a qualified herp veterinarian to have it examined and tested to ensure that you are starting with a healthy reptile. While the cost of the exam and testing will likely be more than the price of the herp, it is a good idea and will teach your child about responsible pet ownership. Many pet owners think nothing of taking a stray kitten or puppy from the pound in to see a vet, and will spend many more times the purchase price (or adoption fee) on veterinary care, but sometimes, I think owners of exotics tend to think in terms of what the animal costs compared to veterinary care and upkeep. How can you put a price on love or on the special relationship between a pet and its owner? By having your new herp examined and any appropriate testing done, you will be doing all that you can to ensure that you all get off to a good start.

I'm sorry that I cannot give you any more specific information about the cause of the demise of your son's gecko. But, hopefully, you will be more educated concerning your next choice of a lizard. The death of a pet is a tough lesson for a child to deal with, however, it can be a positive learning experience, as death is a part of life, and pet owners must learn to cope with the loss of an animal, as it will happen to all of us at one time or another.

Please pass my condolences to your son over the loss of his pet gecko.

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. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.