

Reptile Injury or Metabolic Bone Disease

How can you tell the difference between a herp injury and a disease?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

We have a female collard lizard, which we have had now for four weeks (juvenile). About one week ago, we noticed her front right hand to be extremely swollen. We called the vet, who supposedly was to be familiar with reptiles. We took her in and the vet took an x-ray and upon viewing the x-ray told us that he was not sure if there was a possible compression fracture and that her bone looked gray in color. He suggested a bigger habitat and calcium. We informed him that we do dust her food everyday with calcium and that she was in a 20-inch-long tank with UVB lighting and a basking light.

Prior to our appointment, I was reading information on the Internet about this MBD so that I had the awareness of what the disease was and treatments. The veterinarian's recommendation was: a bigger enclosure and calcium. However, he mentioned nothing about giving "Zam" (our precious lizard) any injection or calcium medicine. I feel that he had no idea about this reptile and sent us on our way. I took it upon myself to investigate as much information on this and – assuming she does have MBD – how to treat it. We did pick up a 40-gallon breeder tank the next day, and she has 5.0 UVB as well as her basking light. She now has an abrasion on top of the swollen hand. We have been treating it with peroxide and triple antibiotic ointment. The condition of her hand is the same as it was a week ago: still swollen and an abrasion, which she probably got because she is very crazy and is constantly jumping on the glass. It is very hard to find a veterinarian who is truly familiar with reptiles and treatment. I want to do everything possible to help her. Could you please help me in any way that you can in regards to treatment or what I should be telling the vet that she needs (such as calcium medicine, injections, etc.). I have attached a picture that I had just taken.

Thank you so much for your time, and I look forward to hearing back from you. It is greatly appreciated.

It certainly seems you have done your homework regarding your collared lizard. Please have a look at the answer I gave to the owner of a gecko that also had a swollen limb to get an idea of what could be causing the problem.

Since I just covered that in a previous answer, I can take the space here to discuss your options for veterinary care. Since your vet did take radiographs, it is possible to have the films sent to a board-certified radiologist who has a special interest in reptiles. These films can either be sent via "snail mail" or digital pictures can be taken of the radiographs, which are then e-mailed to the specialist for evaluation. There is a charge for this service, but it is well worth it if the radiologist is able to determine what is going on with the bones and soft tissue. These veterinarians probably look at radiographs of exotics on a daily basis. Their expertise can be invaluable in deciphering herp radiographs.

Next, veterinary diagnostic labs usually offer a consultation service to their clients (the veterinarians) at no charge, providing access to veterinary specialists in different fields of veterinary medicine. Perhaps you can suggest to your herp vet that he take advantage of the consultation service, asking to speak with a herp vet associated with his diagnostic laboratory. This way your vet can discuss the radiographs and physical examination with the specialist, who can then offer suggestions regarding testing and treatment. Combined with the insight of a radiology specialist, your lizard will then have the expertise of several specialists who can help diagnose and treat your little lizard.

If your current veterinarian is not amenable to your suggestions, perhaps you can ask him for a referral to a specialty center or another herp vet with more experience. He should not take offense to this request and should provide you with copies of your file (there may be a nominal charge for this) to take to the vet for the second opinion.

I understand your frustration in trying to locate a qualified herp vet truly competent in this field, but they are out there. Sometimes it is best to seek out a young, fresh-out-of-vet-school veterinarian who is long on enthusiasm but may be short on practical experience. They are often willing to learn along with you and are usually happy to utilize their lab's consultation service in order to provide your pet with the best care possible.

Don't be afraid to quiz potential herp vets about their level of experience, how many collard lizards they have seen and treated, and if they feel comfortable performing diagnostics, such as drawing blood for a complete blood count and chemistry panel. Ask if they would be willing to consult a specialist and ask for assistance. It's your lizard, and you have the right to expect the highest quality care for it. Don't settle for anything less.

This does not sound like or look like (based on your photo) nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism, a form of metabolic bone disease. But until you have a proper evaluation performed, we won't know for sure. Thanks for including the photo.



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.