

Bloated Tiger Salamander

What can cause an amphibian to look bloated?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I own two tiger salamanders, which I have had for about 10 years. They have always lived together and have always been healthy. One is larger than the other and I assume it's a female as everything I have read states that females are larger. In May 2004, the larger one started looking fat; her head, tail and legs are normal, but her body looks bloated. She is still acting and eating normally. The levels in the water are normal. Nothing in the habitat or diet has changed. I have not taken her to the vet because I have not found one in the San Diego area that specializes in herps. I have been soaking her in Pedialyte as suggested by some of my herp friends. It has now been over 4 weeks and she still is looking bloated but acting and eating normally. I usually feed them pinkies, but my herp friends suggested going back to earthworms, which are easier to digest until I find out what is wrong. Any help would be greatly appreciated.

-Erika

Dear Erika,

I think it is very important that you find a veterinarian who can help you with your salamander. A swollen abdomen that occurs acutely can be the result of gastric bloat, but since this has been going on for several weeks, I doubt that this is the problem.

Obesity is quite common in captive amphibians. Since most amphibians store the majority of body fat in the form of intra-abdominal fat pads, the obese amphibian often has a grossly distended abdomen and normal appearing legs and tail. I suspect this is what is wrong with your salamander, but of course, I can only offer an educated guess.

Other things that can cause this appearance of your salamander might be a tumor, intestinal parasite overload, reproductive problem, swollen internal organ, abscess or other type of space-occupying mass, although these seem less likely since she is still eating and acting normally.

Ask around at pet stores or local herp breeders to see who they use as a herp veterinarian. There must be a veterinarian in your area with herp experience. Even if there isn't, you might be able to find a young vet, recently out of school, who is interested in herp medicine and is willing to learn. Don't forget that any veterinarian who uses a veterinary diagnostic lab is able to call in and request a consultation with a specialist who can walk them through what to do and how to interpret the diagnostics. Encourage the vet that you choose to take advantage of the consultation service offered by veterinary laboratories, and you should be able to get the help you need for your salamander. And by the way, congrats for taking such good care of them that you have kept them healthy for almost ten years. That is quite an achievement! I have some marbled salamanders, and I know the amount of care that is required to keep them in the correct habitat and conditions! Now, find a vet who can help you keep them going longer still (tiger salamanders in the wild have a life expectancy up to 15 years).

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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.