

Chameleon With Blood-filled Sacs Around Eyes

What could blood-filled lumps under my chameleon's eyes be?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Recently my veiled chameleon has developed puffy sacs in front of his eyes. They are having obvious effects on his eating and mobility. I took him to a vet that deals with reptiles and his first thought was a tear gland problem. We tried eye drops, and they did nothing. So we decided to use anesthesia and look into his eyes to see what the problem was. When I arrived after this procedure, the doctor had two syringes filled with blood that he had drained from the sacs. They immediately filled back up when he was done. He tested the blood, and it was pure blood, with nothing else mixed in. It also did not show any sign of cancer or other problems.

The vet has currently contacted other colleagues at the University of Florida and the University of South Carolina, along with someone at a zoo. We are waiting for one other response. I am writing to try to take extra steps to figuring out what this problem is.

I am told that the cage environment that I have him in is appropriate and the care and food that I am using is good. Can you think of anything that this could be, or do you have any suggestions?

One other quick question: Can you recommend any other plants that I can use in his cage besides a ficus tree and philodendrons? I would like to spruce up his cage with a variety of plants and maybe some flowers.

Let's start with the easy answer first: There are plenty of lists of toxic plants listed in textbooks and on the Internet, and conversely, there are also lists of safe (or edible) plants, often associated with green iguana habitats, for example. Make sure you choose a reliable database (such as one associated with a veterinary college, poison control center, etc.)

Because veiled chameleons often consume some vegetation (especially when younger), it is important that you only use nontoxic plants in your chameleon's enclosure. If you purchase plants from a nursery or store selling houseplants, make sure that they don't have pesticide residue, insecticide or any possible toxins (fertilizer, for example). Two different inexpensive, pretty and easy-to-grow plants are impatiens and hibiscus. If you can speak with a knowledgeable botanist at a nursery or plant store, he or she can also help you to pick out safe plants. Because you are (hopefully) using a full-spectrum light with UVB range, most houseplants and garden plants will thrive well under those conditions.

I wouldn't use philodendrons in your chameleon's habitat. They are in the Araceae family and are considered to contain the toxic principle called calcium oxalate crystals that can cause burning, salivation, oral irritation, difficulty swallowing and irritation of the tongue. If your chameleon did ingest some pieces of philodendron, it could cause problems. But, I don't think it would result in the bloody pouches that you have described.

I honestly have never seen anything like what you are describing in your veiled chameleon. It is a well-known fact that vitamin A deficiency can cause swollen eyes in chameleons, but I have never seen hypovitaminosis A result in blood-filled pouches. I wonder if he could have a problem with his liver that resulted in the bleeding episodes? One of the functions of the liver is to produce agents that are necessary for normal blood clotting, so liver disease could result in abnormal bleeding, and failure to clot normally. Specific blood tests could help determine if the liver is not functioning properly, but a liver biopsy would provide definitive diagnostic information regarding the liver itself.

I am sorry that I cannot provide you with specific answers about your chameleon. I called several of my herp vet friends and also a herp breeder who is a great friend of mine, and none of us have ever seen this occur in a chameleon before. It sure seems that we all have a lot to learn about the specific conditions and diseases of many of our herps, and as more information is shared between vets, and published in a variety of sources, this will all aid us in the future enormously. If any of my colleagues have seen or heard of this condition in chameleons, please feel free to contact me through the "Ask The Vet" column and I will be sure to publish the responses.

Good luck with your chameleon. As a precaution, get that philodendron out of the habitat. Ask your vet if he might want to consult an experienced herp vet through the free consultation service offered by most large diagnostic labs. It might be a good idea to run blood tests on your chameleon, and I would suggest that no more blood be removed from the pouches in front of the eyes, as I worry about that causing anemia. If the pouches have re-filled with blood, the body can "recycle" some of the blood components, which cannot occur if the blood is removed via syringe. It might not be a bad idea for your vet to administer vitamin B complex (which helps mature red blood cells) and iron dextran (which provides iron for red blood cells), to help your lizard produce and mature more red blood cells.

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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.