

Coughing Lizard

Can reptiles get colds?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have a male green iguana and he has a cough. Can they get colds from humans? How can this be treated? I am very concerned and care for him as a child. He coughs once a day, like he is trying to clear his throat. He has a heat lamp and a heat rock and spends most of his time there. He also got very upset a few weeks ago and chewed up his face on his cage. I did clean and treat it with Neosporin. He is healing but slowly. He gets vitamins in his food and likes cottage cheese. He eats mainly vegetables with fruit in it every other day. His color seems to be a bit off like he isn't feeling well which to me means a sign of something wrong. Maybe I worry too much. He is also shedding and I really try to keep him hydrated with a mister. Please advise. Thank you!

Your green iguana cannot catch a cold from a human. For the most part, viruses are species-specific, meaning that a virus is adapted to thrive and multiply in only one species of animal or in closely related species. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Rabies is one virus that is able to infect all warm-blooded animals, making it particularly dangerous, but that virus does not act like typical viruses.

If your iguana has a color change, is coughing and has injured his face and nose in the cage, then I would suggest that you make an appointment with a herp vet in your area to have him evaluated as soon as possible.

The iguana's diet sounds adequate, but I would recommend that you introduce some commercial iguana pellets or canned food, in addition to the vegetables (fruits should be kept to 10% or less, due to their incorrect calcium: phosphorus ratio). Your herp vet can make specific dietary recommendations when you bring him in for an evaluation. While your iguana may like cottage cheese, you should probably limit that to a teaspoonful once a week as a treat.

You didn't tell me about his temperature and humidity, nor did you mention full-spectrum lighting. This information is important for me to know in order to evaluate the lizard's living conditions. The iguana's environment should have a daytime temperature range between 82 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit during the day with a focal hot-spot (basking area) that is between 95 and 100 F. The night-time temperature should range between 75-78 F (and not dropping below 70 F). The iguana should be provided with sunlight, not filtered through glass or plastic (several hours per week), or there should be a full-spectrum light that produces UVB wavelengths, replaced as recommended by the manufacturer.

While misting is helpful, I have found that iguanas love to swim and spend time in the water, where they will drink water and exercise, and most will urinate and defecate in the water, as well. I find that the healthiest iguanas are those that have full-time access to a kiddie pool that is heated (either by a submersible aquarium heater or by a pig warmer (placed under the pool), which contains heating coils embedded in a fiberglass frame that plugs into a regular wall-outlet). I am convinced that by providing a pool large enough for the iguana to swim and soak, that we will have fewer kidney problems because the iguanas will not be chronically dehydrated!!!

Since you have had your iguana for a while, you should know that they sneeze out excess salt and minerals through their nose, and I am assuming that this is not what you are describing. You said that it is more like a cough. That should warrant a trip to your herp veterinarian's office, especially when combined with his color change and banged up face.

You obviously really care about your lizard, so I think a trip to your herp vet is the right thing to do. If you don't have a herp vet, you can call a few local vets who don't see herps, and ask them who they recommend in your area, or you can check with a few local pet retailers and ask whom they recommend as a herp vet. Another suggestion is that if you have an enthusiastic herp veterinarian in your area who doesn't have a lot of herp experience, you can perhaps propose that your veterinarian utilize the free consultation service that most veterinary diagnostic labs offer to veterinarians who use their lab. This can be a great help for veterinarians new to herp medicine or even just for a vet wishing for a second opinion on a case or someone wanting help interpreting blood work.

Good luck with your iguana! I hope he'll be okay.

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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.