

Bearded Dragon Lizard Constipation or Partial Impaction

My bearded dragon lizard does not want anything to do with crickets, since he began eating mealworms. He only goes to the bathroom about every four to six weeks. What could be wrong?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

We have a 2 ½ -year-old bearded dragon named Merlin. We always fed him crickets (he would go crazy for them), but about a year ago, we decided to try feeding him meal worms. Since then he does not want anything to do with crickets. Also he only goes to the bathroom about every four to six weeks! I have both a basking light in one end of the tank and a UV in the other end. Someone suggested substrate could be the problem, so I changed from reptile sand to papertowel. He will eat his veggies but only from my hand and he has a bath/swim at least once a week and in the summer gets to hang out outside sometimes. Can you suggest a way to get him to eat crickets again or are mealworms ok? And should we be worried about the lack of bowel movements (he used to go every four to five days)?

My first suggestion is that you make an appointment with a herp vet and get Merlin in to see someone ASAP. It is definitely not normal for a beardie to only have a bowel movement every four to six weeks. So, if you have a herp vet, please make an appointment, and if you don't, please find one and set up a visit as soon as possible.

Here are my concerns: First, it is never a good idea for any herp to consume only one or two food items. Variety is the spice of life and the key to a healthy diet. Animals that consume a narrow range of food items are much more likely to develop nutritional deficiencies. Next, while mealworms can be a valid portion of a beardie's diet, there have been concerns that the exoskeleton can be tough on the digestive tract of certain species. If fed exclusively, in addition to potential nutritional deficiencies, there is a chance of developing intestinal impactions from the exoskeletons of the mealworms. But since he is also consuming some greens, that should help somewhat.

Please check in the archives and make sure that you are providing the correct environment for your beardie, as many new owners don't keep them nearly warm enough. If you don't have thermometers/hygrometers to measure the values, please put those on your shopping list immediately.

Your herp vet will want to know the temperature ranges for your beardie's habitat. Your vet may want to take radiographs (x-rays) and will probably want to run bloodwork, as well. This is necessary to try to determine just why your lizard is not defecating regularly.

The two main reasons why your lizard may not be defecating regularly is either because it is not ingesting enough to go regularly (although I would suspect that it might still defecate weekly, but just a smaller amount each time) or that it has a slowed down gastrointestinal tract due to either foreign body problems (such as a partial impaction from cage substrate or insect exoskeletons, for example) or from some other problem (which may be related to too cool of a cage temperature).

So please don't hesitate to take your beardie in to see a herp vet as soon as possible. The vet may be able to help you with the bowel movement problems as well as his becoming fussy about his diet.

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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.