

Lizard Leg Injury and Calcium Deficiency

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By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I just bought a water dragon, and it jumped off my sofa last night. This morning I noticed it has a swollen knee and cannot bend it! The dragon is still active. Could you give me any information on this?

I am very concerned about your little water dragon. You are going to need to have it examined and treated by a herp vet, and the sooner, the better.

It always amazes me that reptiles can suffer from horrible dislocations or fractures, yet they still move around, eat and pretty much act like nothing much is wrong. They are so adaptable and just seem to go with the flow! That doesn't mean that we should ignore a medical problem just because the herp is still active and acting OK. They do suffer from pain, and while pain is subjective, and we cannot know the degree of pain that a herp feels after a traumatic injury, we do know that they do feel pain. But how they deal with that pain varies greatly between animals. I think that they do just deal with what they are given, which is what your little guy is doing.

Your dragon may have some degree of problem with calcium metabolism, meaning that it didn't have enough calcium in its bones to support his frame, so that when it jumped off the sofa, it was more susceptible to injury. That may be why it so severely injured its limb in the accident. For normal growth and development, some lizards require full-spectrum lighting with UVB spectrum, in order to properly utilize calcium. If your little guy has not been receiving full-spectrum lighting, or if its diet was deficient in calcium, it could have a much more fragile skeleton than normal. I discuss metabolic bone disease, more correctly called nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism in some archived questions, so have a look through the archives for more information on this common problem.

Even if your dragon has had appropriate calcium and lighting, it may have landed in such a way that it fractured or dislocated its leg anyway. Lizards are normally very adept at jumping and are very agile, but accidents can still happen, especially if it landed in an unusual way. The dragon may have a broken bone or it may have a dislocation. It might be just soft tissue swelling, but there is no way to be sure without a veterinary evaluation. Radiographs (X-rays) may be required in order to correctly diagnose the problem. Once the injury has been identified, only then can proper treatment be undertaken. Your lizard may require a cast, luxation reduction or perhaps just TLC and some pain medication, but at this point, we don't know what it needs.

Please find a herp vet who can help you with your water dragon. Your lizard definitely needs medical attention in order to have the best chance to have that limb restored to normalcy. Without veterinary care, it may recover, but it may lose the use of the limb, or your dragon may develop problems with the nerves, resulting in the dragon damaging the tissue without ever knowing that it has traumatized the limb. Because the dragon is a youngster, it would be best to attempt to return it to as normal as possible, and for that you need a herp vet to help you. Good luck!

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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.