

Lizard Losing Toes

My lizard keeps losing its front toes.

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

One of my green water dragon lizards, a female, keeps losing her front toes. The toes seem to become discolored, gradually fall off and she is left with a foot stump. This does not happen to the male lizard. The lizards seem to get along well, and she eats well. Is this just from trauma in the cage, or is there a disease I should be concerned about? How can I prevent this from happening?

You didn't say if your water dragon lizards are adults or not. I am assuming that they are, as it is difficult to sex them as juveniles. An adult male and female water dragon will usually get along together in the same enclosure, and you said that they seem to get along, so I will assume that the problem isn't resulting from lizard fight wounds.

Because I don't know what kind of habitat you are keeping the water dragon lizards in, my first concern would be that the lizards are not in an environment with enough humidity. Do you have a large area for them to swim in regularly? Often, if the humidity is too low, there may be difficulty in shedding (called dysecdysis) and little tags of skin that remain, if encircling a toe, may cause a constriction, restricting the blood flow to a lizard's toe. This results in the lizard's toe drying up and falling off. One way to check to see if the blood supply has been compromised is by clipping the lizard's toenail to see if it bleeds.

Another cause of a toe drying up and falling off is if carpet or hair fibers wrap around the toe, causing the blood supply to become compromised. Certain fungi can produce toxins that cause constriction of blood vessels, especially to the extremities, and this can also result in the loss of digits. Trauma can also cause problems such as these. Pulling her off of a wire may also damage nails and digits. Infections, tumors, other types of trauma, metabolic diseases and parasitic diseases can also result in damaged toes. There can be many causes for what you are describing, so all I can do is give you the information about them. But it is up to you to take her in to see a herp vet to ascertain the cause in her case.

So that your female lizard doesn't lose all of her toes, I would suggest that you take her in to see a herp veterinarian when she has a toe that is beginning to look abnormal. Blood work, cultures, cytology and radiographs (X-rays) may be necessary to determine the cause of the problem. Please take her in the next time you notice an abnormal toe, and perhaps you and your vet will be able to save her remaining toes and claws.

Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP has been an avian/exotic/herp animal veterinarian since 1981. She is a regular contributor to REPTILES magazine.

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.