

Care For a Lizard Not Eating

My reptile ran away and now that I found her again, she won't eat. Why is this?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have 3-year-old leopard gecko. She went missing for nine months, and then I found her again. Her tail was very fat, and she looked very healthy and smothered me with kisses when I found her. The problem is she will not eat now.

I have been hand-feeding her a mixture of chicken, turkey baby food with a pinch each of Rep-Cal Phosphorus Free Calcium with Vitamin D, Herptivite, Spirulina, Leopard Gecko Dust, and three to four drops of ElectroDize from ExoTerra. I give her 3½ to 4 mL every other day. I have tried giving her crickets and mealworms, but she refuses to eat. Please help?

Well, I see by your email address and phone number that you are a fellow Floridian. I think I have come up with a reason why your errant lizard won't eat. Because your gecko was obviously consuming something during its adventure, it has probably developed a taste for bugs that it had caught around your home. Please don't take this as a commentary on your housekeeping, as I know for a fact that all Florida homes have the occasional bug, roach, moth and spider that makes its way indoors. I suspect that it has been eating native bugs and has lost its taste for crickets and mealworms. Also, some bugs are intermediate hosts for certain lizard parasites, so that could be a problem.

Another reason why your gecko might be refusing food is if it is gravid. Turn it over and take a close look at its belly. If you see two white oval masses mid-abdomen (one on each side), then there is a good chance that it is gravid. If you have never observed eggs in a female gecko, it is possible to mistake the abdominal fat pads for eggs. Even if it hadn't been cavorting with a male gecko, it might still develop eggs (although this is less likely). I don't think it is likely that your gecko found itself another leopard gecko to copulate with, even here in Florida!

Another cause of anorexia is from some sort of disease, which could include intestinal parasites, impaction with sand or some other inedible substances, an infection (protozoal, bacterial or rarely fungal), dystocia [retained egg(s)] or it could be simply that since you are force-feeding it, your gecko is not hungry. Try going a few days without feeding it and then offer a tasty cockroach (the bigger palmetto bugs smell like Dr. Pepper when crushed) or moth and see what happens.

But, because your gecko was on the lam for nine months, you should make an appointment with your herp veterinarian and make sure that there is not a medical cause for its reluctance to eat. That way you can put your mind at ease and ensure that it is OK after its trip to the wilds of your home.

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.