

Lizard With Swollen Jaw and Leg, Losing Weight

My reptile looks like it has renal failure. Is there anything that i can do to help him get better?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have an iguana that is about 1 ½ years old. He came from a very bad background. He has gotten sick in the past week. His lower jaw is swollen, and he has a hard knot on one side. His back leg is also swollen. This is all on the right side of the body. He is losing weight, though he is eating well. I did some research and it all looks like renal failure. Is there anything that i can do to help him get better? We live in a town where there are no herp vets, so I need all the advice you can give. I love my iguana and don't want to lose him.

I cannot attempt to diagnose your iguana from information on the Internet or from your letter. To provide the best care for your lizard, you are going to have to enlist the help of a veterinarian. There must be a vet somewhere in your area who treats herps. The easiest way to find one is to call a few local vets who don't treat herps, and ask them who they refer reptile cases to. Also, you can call a few pet stores that carry herps, and ask them who they recommend as a herp veterinarian. You can also check the Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians website to see if there are any members in your area.

Another suggestion is to find a vet who is willing but perhaps not very experienced in herp medicine. Many new graduates are excited to see unusual species. You can encourage this vet to utilize a free consultation service offered by many of the large veterinary diagnostic laboratories. This is how it works: your vet puts in a call to the lab, and an experienced herp veterinarian will call back to discuss your case. The consultant can offer advice on what diagnostic tests to run, how to interpret the lab result and what medications, if any, to administer. The consultant can also give your vet information about where to send the X-rays for evaluation, if necessary. This can be invaluable to help your ill lizard, and it will also provide your vet with a wealth of information. All you really need to do is find a veterinarian who is willing to help you and your iguana, and who is also willing to take advantage of a consultation service.

Although I cannot diagnose your iguana's problems, I suspect your iguana is suffering from a form of metabolic bone disease, called nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism (NSHP). This occurs when a herp does not have a full-spectrum light that produces ultraviolet light (especially UVB) or it is not exposed to natural sunlight unfiltered through glass or plastic. The UVB portion of light is involved with the metabolism of vitamin D3 production, which is also involved with calcium uptake and utilization. NSHP can also be the result of a lizard not having enough calcium in the diet. It usually manifests itself with the lizard developing swollen limbs, a misshapen spine or a deformed jaw. The swelling of the limb(s) occurs because there's not enough calcium in the bones to hold their shape, so the lizard develops excessive fibrous connective tissue to help support the skeletal structure. Sometimes, the lizard will develop spontaneous fractures of the long bones, backbone, tail or even the jaw, which can result in swelling and hard knots or bumps.

Often, in early NSHP, the lizard will no longer lift itself up to walk. It will crawl, dragging itself along. That can be the first sign the lizard is having problems with calcium metabolism.

In some cases, NSHP can also go along with some renal (kidney) problems, so it's important to understand a pet herp can have more than one problem at a time. Diagnosing either kidney problems or calcium/bone problems is going to require the services of a veterinarian. You simply cannot do this on your own. Good luck on your quest to get your lizard healthy again.

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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.