

Lizards Not Eating

Why have my geckos and iguanas stopped eating as much?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have several different reptiles and all of them are normally very good eaters. But, lately, a few of my leopard geckoes and my largest iguana have lost their appetites. Vahn, my 3-foot iguana, who is usually a very hearty eater, has suddenly cut back (usually he eats about two bowls of mixed veggies a day; now, he eats one every two days).

Plus, a few of my leopards are getting skinny. One of my girls, Quinn (she was the first leopard that I hatched), has almost stopped eating completely. She seems lethargic. I guess it started right after I took her first clutch of eggs away from her to incubate them. I don't know if that has anything to do with it.

I just wanted to know if there was a safe appetite stimulant for reptiles that I could get for them. I'd like to try that before I take them to the vet and stress them out by having lots of tests done (especially Quinn, who's gravid again). Thanks for your help.

Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet that acts as an appetite stimulant for herps. For a long time, people thought that metronidazole (Flagyl™) acted as an appetite stimulant, but now it is suspected that the reason that it stimulated the appetite was because it knocked back some intestinal protozoa, when given as a one-time oral dose. Also, metronidazole can act as an anti-inflammatory, temporarily making a pet feel better.

Assuming that you are maintaining your herps at the correct temperature and humidity for the species you keep, and that you are feeding them correctly, there can be several reasons why herps may develop anorexia (lack of appetite or lack of feeding response).

Iguanas may slow down on their eating due to hormonal issues. Breeding male iguanas often go through a period of anorexia. However, infections, kidney disease or other illnesses can also cause a decreased appetite. Please have Vahn evaluated by a competent herp veterinarian to find out why he has suddenly cut back on his eating. Many adult green iguanas do quite well being fed every other day, but the fact that he has suddenly cut back is what concerns me.

As for your geckos, I really think that you should have Quinn examined by your herp vet, as well. Because geckos are insectivorous, the insects that you feed should be gut-loaded and also supplemented with calcium. Females don't usually suffer from depression from having their eggs removed for incubation.

You didn't describe the diet that you are feeding the leopard geckos, so I can't really help you with specific advice. I don't know if you are offering the adult breeder females the occasional pinky mouse, for example. Waxworms are very high in fat and can be offered to help put weight on "the girls," but I think that you should have them examined by your herp vet. Perhaps you can ask your vet if you can bring in stool samples from the female geckos, so that they can be checked for internal parasites. Maybe your vet would also allow you to obtain stool cultures from them, for bacterial testing, as well. However, keep in mind that your vet won't be able to prescribe any medications or treatments without personally examining the herps, which is a legal requirement. So, work with your vet and tell him/her of your concerns about handling and stress, and perhaps you can come to an agreement that will help you and your herps. Instead of looking for a panacea or quick fix to increase the appetite of your herps, you need to try to figure out why they have developed partial anorexia and then correct that.

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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.