

Reptile Attacked By Another Animal

Our lizard is not eating after being bit by another animal. What can we do?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

We have a bearded dragon that is probably between the ages of 3 to 6 months old. Unfortunately, yesterday his cage was mistakenly left open and our cat took advantage of the situation. I found my cat on the floor of our bedroom with Spike lying right next to him. When I first picked him up, he was ice cold, and I thought for sure that he was dead. But after a minute or so I realized that he was still breathing, so I put him back in his cage to warm up.

He came to after a few hours and once his body was back up to normal temp I realized that he had a few bite marks on his tail and in his neck area. His movement was pretty scarce last night, but he has perked up a little more today. He actually made it up to the top of his favorite perch. I have not been able to get him to eat anything, but I was able to get him to drink water from the water bowl. I am hoping that the lack of wanting to eat is because of the expenditure of energy that it requires to catch the crickets.

Is there anything else that I should be doing to help him out? Was his response shock or more of a natural defense mechanism? Any help or advice that you could provide would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions please let me know.

Bite wounds from other animals, especially cats, are very dangerous to herps, so it is imperative that you find a herp vet as soon as possible who can assist you with your beardie. In addition to cleaning out the wounds with antiseptic soap or povidone iodine scrub as first aid measures, the next step should be to keep your beardie warm and hydrated until you can seek veterinary care.

Your beardie will most likely require antibiotic therapy, either given orally or by injection, to combat the bacteria that were injected into the wounds from teeth and claws. While your lizard is on antibiotics, it should be kept at the high end of its temperature range, in order for the antibiotics to work the most effectively. Your vet will be able to help you by providing the information that you will need to know to properly care for your beardie during this time.

I hope that you already have an established relationship with a herp vet in your area, and that he or she has already examined and tested your lizard, but if that hasn't happened, you need to find a herp vet immediately. If you don't have one, call a few local pet retailers or herp breeders and ask who they use for a herp vet, or you can call a few local vets who don't treat herps and ask whom they would refer reptiles to.

If you have been reading my column, you know that my advice is that if you can't find a vet who is comfortable with herps, or is a new graduate, but is willing to see your lizard, be sure to remind them that most diagnostic labs offer a free consultation service with exotic vets who can help them and advise them about the case. This can be invaluable for the vet just starting out with herps or for experienced herp vets just wanting a second opinion on a difficult case.

I'm sure that your beardie was suffering from some degree of shock and also from becoming hypothermic while out of its enclosure. The cat attack and the bites are both likely to cause behavioral and physical changes. Beardies are likely to go into a torporlike condition when there are any environmental changes, and that can also be a possible contributory factor. But the most likely reason for it not eating is from the bite wounds.

I cannot stress enough how serious these bites can be, so please find a qualified herp vet and get started on whatever treatment is necessary. With appropriate care that is started within a reasonable period of time, you have a good chance that you can save your beardie.

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.