Herp Spinal Injury

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By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I stumbled across this site after my newest addition, a captive-bred savannah monitor, took a leap from my hands while I was replacing his substrate and landed on the floor about 3 feet below. When he landed, he rolled to his side and sat very still. I picked him up and comforted him. He seemed fine; however, when I put him back into his tank, he was dragging his back legs. He has seemed to stop dragging them. The last time I took him out he wrapped them around my arm like he usually does, but I am still unsure. I have had several varanids, including four other savannahs, and have never had this problem. I would really appreciate any advice you have.

Because most lizards have a relatively long spine and short legs, there is an inherent risk to spinal injuries due to a fall, other trauma, calcium deficiency, infection or obesity. A lizard may damage the spine during a fall and cause a compression fracture to a vertebra. In addition, an injury might result in a disc, the spongy material between vertebrae, being forced out of its normal space. This will compress the spine, resulting in hind-leg weakness or paralysis, tail paralysis and possibly urination and defecation problems.

Any time a herp shows signs of weakness or paralysis to the hind legs and tail (or hind end in the case of a snake), have that animal examined and tested by a qualified herp veterinarian. Specific anti-inflammatories can help with inflammation of the spine and spinal cord if that is what is causing the weakness (also called paresis) or paralysis. If the problem is related to nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism (a form of metabolic bone disease), then additional therapy is usually warranted. This includes a hormone called calcitonin salmon and calcium supplementation. Providing herps with access to natural, unfiltered sunlight or installing full-spectrum lighting that emits UVB is another necessary step. Change bulbs as recommended by the manufacturer. If infection is involved, appropriate antibiotic therapy is administered. In many cases, X-rays can pinpoint the location of the lesion. Other diagnostics might include an ultrasound, blood tests, cultures or PCR (polymerase-chain-reaction) tests.

Although herp vets often prescribe cage rest for any herp with paresis or paralysis, which you can certainly provide at home, many effective medications qualified herp vets prescribe and administer you cannot provide yourself.

Please schedule an appointment with your herp vet even though your monitor is improving. There might be medications that can help him recover even faster or more completely.

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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.