

Hypocalcemic Herp

My lizard has many problems after a fall. What is wrong with it?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have a 6-year-old male iguana. He has been healthy up to this past winter. He was not eating much and not moving around much. One afternoon I heard a noise and found the iguana at the bottom of his cage. He had fallen. I took him to the vet. The vet said he was anemic and his kidneys were enlarged. The vet is having me feed him two times a day with 10 cc of critical care food. I also got him a bulb that has UVB as well as UVA. When we first got the iguana, the pet store said the bulb with UVA was the right one. I know now that they were wrong. He also has a new ceramic heater and an old pet heating pad. He is eating better, and I have been putting him in the bath tub more. His back legs seem to be weak. What can I do for him as far as exercise and calcium, and how much? Also, I run a humidifier in the room now. After his fall I also noticed his toes twitching, and I think he might have had a couple seizures, but both have discontinued now. He has put on weight. Any advice you can give me I will appreciate.

Since your iguana has had the incorrect lighting for quite some time now, you are describing the classic signs of adult-onset hypocalcemia related to metabolic bone disease (nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism). The toe twitching and seizures are most likely related to low blood calcium levels. When the body can no longer regulate the blood calcium level (due to incorrect lighting and/or diet), muscle fasciculations (twitching) and seizures may ensue. Your iguana most likely needs calcium supplementation, and for that, you will need to ask your vet for help. Your pet should probably receive injectable calcium at first, perhaps with vitamin D3 supplementation to help facilitate absorption (though giving vitamin D parenterally -- by injection -- is not proven to be as effective as natural sunlight or UVB light).

Make sure that you are maintaining your iguana between 85 and 95 degrees Fahrenheit with a focal hot spot for basking that can be 5 degrees higher than that. Please be careful with old heating pads because they are not designed to remain on 24 hours a day. A fire could result. Humidity should range between 60 to 80 percent. I am convinced that the best way to prevent kidney failure (a common cause of death in adult iguanas) is to provide them with a large kiddie pool that the iguana can swim and soak in daily. The water should be warmed with either a submersible aquarium heater or by using a pig warmer under the pool. Although I think high humidity is somewhat important, I feel that iguanas able to swim and drink water every day do the best at staying hydrated and keeping their kidneys flushed out.

Since your iguana shows signs of low blood calcium, I would not recommend performing any exercises at this point. You can soak him in tepid water twice daily, but don't let him move around too much until he is stronger.

Your iguana should be given 20 cc of the critical care formula per 1000 grams of body weight every 48 hours. There are 454 grams in one pound of weight.

You mentioned your vet said that your iguana was anemic. Did he or she do bloodwork? If so, that should give you information about the kidneys, liver, etc., as well as information about infections. If your vet uses a send-out lab for testing, I would suggest you ask your vet to schedule a consultation with a veterinarian associated with the diagnostic lab in order to obtain more information. Your vet can speak with an experienced veterinarian who can give your vet advice about other diagnostics, treatment and support care. For example, I would suggest your vet test your iguana's blood calcium level. Because your iguana has signs of low blood calcium, he might benefit from treatment with injectable calcium, vitamins, perhaps injectable fluids and even treatment with a hormone called calcitonin salmon to help with the calcium problems. Another medication called DMG (dimethyl glycine) may prove helpful in preventing seizures until the blood calcium level has normalized.

I cannot prescribe dosages for calcium supplementation. This is something that must be decided by your herp veterinarian, based on blood tests and your iguana's body weight.

Make sure you are communicating with your herp vet, and if he or she is not experienced with this type of problem, please encourage your vet to utilize the free consultation service offered by most large veterinary diagnostic labs. This can prove invaluable in helping your iguana on the road to recovery.

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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.