

Reptile Cloacal Prolapse

My lizard looks like her insides are hanging out. What is wrong with her?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

We have a female bearded dragon that recently laid 18 eggs. This is her fourth clutch since we've had her. She laid the 18 eggs Friday evening and was exhausted Saturday morning. Saturday evening I noticed a few blood droplets in the sand. I checked on her, and she was just laying there, but it looked like something was coming out of her. I let her go till the next morning because I wasn't sure what was going on. I picked her up gently Sunday morning, and it looks like her insides are hanging out about half an inch. Am I crazy? I called the vet around the area, and they can't see her for two weeks. Is there anything I can do? She hardly moves around, it seems almost like her back legs are partially paralyzed. She ate crickets yesterday without chasing them, but ate nothing today. What should I be doing?

It sounds as if your beardie has suffered a cloacal prolapse, which means that a section of tissue has become everted and is now protruding out of its cloaca and vent. This is a very serious situation that must be addressed immediately, not in two weeks!

Because the first vet that you called wasn't willing to help you for two weeks, perhaps you should try and contact another. This vet was either very unsympathetic or not very knowledgeable about herp medicine, if the staff thought that you and your beardie could wait two weeks with a prolapse! You can call some local pet retailers, and if you know any herp breeders in your area, try asking them also to see whom they recommend for their herp veterinary care. Maybe you can get a lead on another vet in the area who can help you. Or if there are any younger, new vets in the area, perhaps one of these eager newbies would be willing to assist you. You can suggest that they contact the veterinary lab that they use and ask for a consultation with a staff veterinarian with vast reptile medicine experience. The larger veterinary labs offer consultation services at no charge to their clients. This can be a wonderful source of information and help for vets not familiar with certain aspects of herp medicine and surgery and for vets just venturing out into herp medicine.

If you cannot possibly find anyone else to help you, I would suggest that you call the first vet back and tell them how serious the situation is and ask that you be fit in or referred to another clinic that can help you. This simply cannot wait.

The prolapsed tissue is most likely a portion of the shell gland, also called the oviduct, because your beardie has recently laid eggs (also called oviposition). However, it could also be tissue from the gastrointestinal tract, the colon. If the prolapse is either colon or oviduct, you should be able to see a lumen, a hole, somewhere in this exposed tissue. But, my suspicion is that your beardie has prolapsed a portion of the oviduct.

Until you can seek professional veterinary care, you must do all that you can to help your beardie out. If the tissue is still alive and not black and dead, you must try to keep the tissue clean and moist. That means, if the beardie is currently housed on sand, rocks or any other substrate other than newspaper or plain white paper, you should correct that and house it on clean paper. You should gently wash the tissue with sterile saline (you can use contact lens saline with no preservatives). Try to not handle or touch the tissue, but just use the squirt bottle saline to gently, but thoroughly, flush any debris from the tissue. Once the tissue is clean, apply some sterile water-soluble jelly (such as KY Jelly) to keep the tissue moist. If the tissue is allowed to become dry or injured, it might not be salvageable.

Once you can get your girl into see a vet, he or she will evaluate the situation and decide if the tissue can be safely replaced back inside the cloaca or if more radical surgery must be performed. Often, if a portion of the oviduct has prolapsed, it can be shrunken and replaced back internally; however, frequently there is damage to the suspensory structures that hold the oviduct in place. This means that it is more likely that your beardie may suffer from reproductive problems in the future. Amputation of the exposed and damaged tissues can sometimes be performed. But, it is probably safest to consider having your beardie "spayed" to have the ovaries and both horns of the oviduct removed. Of course, this means that its reproductive days are over, but that may be the case anyway, if it has prolapsed a portion of the oviduct, as I believe it has.

If the tissue can be replaced inside your lizard, usually one or more sutures are placed around the cloaca to keep the tissue inside until the swelling has resolved. Your beardie may require blood tests, fecal parasite exams, radiographs or other tests, and usually anesthesia is required in order to correct the prolapse.

Good luck with your beardie. A prolapse is a very dangerous situation, and I hope that you can find a local veterinarian who will take your call seriously and get you an immediate appointment! In the meantime, clean the tissue and keep it moist until your appointment.



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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.