

Reptile Not Growing

Why is my lizard not eating or growing any larger?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

In March I bought a leopard gecko that is now 5 months old. It has not grown or changed since I bought it. So I went to the place I got it from and apparently the guy who sold me the gecko accidentally bought malnourished young. I went back to the shop because my gecko is underweight, its skin is very baggy and it's not very active. The shop suggested I open its mouth, squeeze a couple of waxworms in and then give the gecko a drink of water to push it down. I did that tonight, and with some effort managed to succeed. Someone else told me to feed two waxworms in the morning and two at night, plus the usual two to three crickets. Is there anything else I can do? Do you suggest I take the gecko to my local reptile vet?

Some reptiles are just stunted because of congenital abnormalities or because their mother's egg was nutrient-deficient for some reason. Incorrect incubation parameters of the egg could also cause stunting. Others become stunted due to problems with internal parasites, bacterial infections, nutritional deficiencies or excesses, husbandry problems (being kept too hot or too cold), other types of infection (including fungi and yeast) or protozoal problems.

To give your gecko the best chance, I would recommend a trip to your herp vet for evaluation. While I realize that it can be difficult to draw adequate amounts of blood for a complete blood count and chemistry profile, testing should be attempted. If possible, bring in a sample of fresh feces (refrigerated until transported, if necessary) for testing. The feces should be tested for worms, protozoa and bacteria. There are many ways of performing these tests, including Gram's staining, acid-fast staining, bacterial culture and sensitivity, fecal flotation, fecal wet mount and perhaps preservation of some fecal material for protozoal testing at a specialized laboratory. Other tests can also be performed on feces. Who knew that we could glean so much information from a scat specimen, eh?

I have seen stunting from chronic infection with the bacterium causing salmonellosis. Another offender that I have seen is the protozoal organism called Entamoeba that can cause chronic disease and stunting.

If you feel that you must supplement his caloric intake, make sure that you don't injure the gecko trying to force-feed it. Make sure you are keeping your gecko at the correct temperature range and humidity (77 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit and 20 to 30 percent relative humidity). It would be best to house the gecko alone, so that there is no competition for food and no stress from conspecifics.

Have your gecko evaluated and tested, so that it can be treated, if possible, once it has been diagnosed. It might be possible to correct its condition, but your gecko may always remain small, even if its situation can be corrected. But, it is worth looking into. I hope it works out for you and your lizard.

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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.