

Reptile Wound Care

Is it dangerous if the feeder nips the reptile?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

My daughter has an 8-foot-long Central American boa that has only ever eaten live food. Recently, Budski did not immediately kill and eat the rat, and the rat ended up biting the tip of Budski's tail. What, if anything, should be done about such bites? It is a very small bite.

Bites from prey should always be considered dangerous. That's why it is always best to train a snake to eat pre-killed prey, if at all possible. But, that said, we need to deal with the problem at hand.

Bites from rodents can be anything from a nuisance to life-threatening or even fatal injuries. With any wounds, it is best to consult a herp veterinarian for specifics. But, good first aid care can and should be employed whenever a herp suffers from an injury involving the skin and possibly the underlying tissues.

If possible, wounds should be washed with copious amounts of warm, soapy water, using an antibacterial soap. If the wound is very deep or is around the face or eyes, it is better to have a professional perform the cleaning. Next, clean the wound with dilute povidone iodine solution, diluted to iced-tea color, flushing the wound several times, and then rinsing well with clean water. For superficial wounds, apply a light layer of antibiotic ointment and leave uncovered. It is difficult to apply a bandage to reptile skin without causing additional trauma. After a bite, keep the wound clean until it has healed.

After a wound has healed, it may result in dysecdysis (difficulty shedding) when it comes time for the next shed. With each successive shed, the scar should become less and less visible; however, some evidence of a wound may remain for quite some time or forever, depending on the severity of the injury.

If a wound is severe, if you can see bone or internal organs or if it is a large, gaping wound, you should take your injured animal to the vet for assistance. Large bite wounds should not be sutured usually, as bites are usually infected and should be treated as open wounds.

At any time, if you feel that the injury is not healing properly, if the animal goes off feed, or if you notice any changes that concern you, please contact your herp vet immediately so that it can be properly evaluated and treated.

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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.