

Terrapin Turtle Not Eating

My terrapin turtle won't take food. He is suffering from edema and was given a vitamin A injection yesterday. What should I do?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Could you please advise me on possible treatment for a terrapin that will not eat? He is 17 years old and has to be tube fed by a vet every two weeks as he will not eat. It distresses him to be fed in this manner, but we are at a loss to know what else to do. He is suffering from edema and was given a vitamin A injection yesterday. I would appreciate any comments you may have.

You didn't say if you have had any lab testing performed on your terrapin. As a minimum data-base, I would recommend that your terrapin have a complete blood count (CBC), plasma chemistry panel, radiographs, fecal parasite exam, fluid analysis (the edema fluid, depending on where it is) and any other tests that seem necessary performed immediately. Edema can be caused by liver problems, cardiac problems or kidney problems, and there can be other causes, as well, including infectious, parasitic, nutritional, fungal, viral, mycoplasma and more. So, it may need to have a cardiac work-up, also, which might include an echocardiogram and ECG (electrocardiogram).

Your terrapin's husbandry and diet need to be evaluated to see if that gives your vet any clues as to why it is building up fluid. If you have owned it for its entire life, you should be able to provide your veterinarian with a detailed history about previous medical problems, diet, temperature range (both air and water) as well as water-quality parameters.

If your vet is not comfortable performing all of those tests and then interpreting them, there are plenty of resources for help. Your vet can contact a radiologist familiar with exotics, for help interpreting the radiographs (x-rays). Most veterinary labs offer veterinarians free consultation services for help with interpretation of the blood tests and treatment protocols. Cardiology groups may offer assistance in interpretation of heart-related diagnostic tests.

Another alternative is to ask your veterinarian for a referral to a veterinary college or large referral center, where teams of veterinarians with much experience with exotics can offer your terrapin a sophisticated level of care and expertise.

Without doing diagnostic testing on your terrapin, I can't even begin to guess why your terrapin has stopped eating, requires tube feeding and has edema. Please get the appropriate diagnostics performed and interpreted, then you will be able to hopefully treat the underlying problem causing the edema and anorexia.

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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.