

Tortoise With a Runny Nose

Is a runny nose in a herp the sign of a cold?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have a 4-year-old (approx.) juvenile eastern box turtle. Within the past week its ear membrane has bulged outward. The turtle does not try to rub or scratch it or display recognizable characteristics indicating it's in pain. I am trying to locate a local vet to diagnose and treat this before it gets worse. A picture is attached. Any idea what this could be and how to correct the ailment?

Tortoises don't get "colds" per se, as we do, which are usually caused by rhinoviruses in humans. However, the symptoms of a respiratory infection in a tortoise can start with a runny nose. Some tortoises normally have a bit of a bubbly secretion in the corners of the eyes. But, if a tortoise has a clear or cloudy discharge, it is usually a sign of upper respiratory disease, or it can also be associated with pneumonia. A nasal discharge is not a sign of pneumonia, but is a reflection of disease within the upper airway or oral cavity.

Upper respiratory infection (URI) may be associated with vitamin A deficiency or other nutritional imbalances. In your case, it should not be involved with keeping your tortoise at the incorrect temperature.

One of the most common causes of respiratory infections in tortoises is from the Mycoplasma organism. A simple DNA PCR test is available to test tortoises for this organism. It is best treated with doxycycline, which should be prescribed and administered by a qualified herp veterinarian. Other organisms can also cause respiratory infections, so it is best to find a vet who can help with the diagnostic process and treatment.

I hope that helps. There are many excellent herp vets in Arizona, as I consult with several of them routinely about their cases through the consultation service with Antech Diagnostic Labs, with which I am associated. So, it shouldn't be too hard to find a vet with the necessary expertise to help you with your leopard tortoise's problem.

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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.