

Eastern Box Turtle Ear Infection

Why is the ear membrane bulging outward in my herp?

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?

Thanks for sending in such a good picture of your turtle. Your turtle most likely has an ear infection, also called an aural abscess. There is no external ear canal in chelonians (turtles and tortoises). The cause of these abscesses isn't known for sure, but it is often associated with poor husbandry (poor diet and incorrect temperature) and hypovitaminosis A (low vitamin A). Most of these infections occur when bacteria from dirty water creeps up the eustachian tube, and sloughed cells (as a result of hypovitaminosis A) congregate in the middle ear. The material that is causing the ear to bulge out is often thick, yellow and has a cottage-cheese-like appearance. Infections can occur on one or both sides.

There is usually discomfort when the turtle opens the mouth, so sometimes they stop eating. You do need to find a herp vet soon so that appropriate diagnostics can be performed and surgery can be performed to open up the ear and scoop out the abscess material and cells. This usually is performed under general anesthesia, and in some cases, it is beneficial to put the turtle on antibiotics, vitamins and fluids for a few days prior to attempting surgery. Don't be surprised when your turtle is left with a gaping opening that you will need to flush daily and then pack with antibiotic ointment. These wounds are not sutured because that would close up the wound again and allow the abscess to re-form.

After your turtle is healed, it is important that any husbandry problems or diet issues be corrected so it doesn't get another abscess.

Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP has been an avian/exotic/herp animal veterinarian since 1981. She is a regular contributor to REPTILES magazine.

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.