

Turtle With Worms

I have noticed a very thin, white-clear, stringlike material coming out of my reptile's cloaca. What is this?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have a red-eared slider that is about 2 years old. I believe it is a female and has a shell width of approximately 6 inches. Recently I have been noticing a very thin, white-clear, stringlike material coming out of her cloaca. It looks like she is shedding her insides and does not look like the descriptions of prolapse. She seems more timid than usual but she does not seem to be in great distress. Her diet, lighting and habitat have not changed recently. Can you please provide some feedback as to what this could be? Should I worry?

Hmmmmmm. Don't you hate it when doctors go "hmmmmmmmm?" Well, then, let's try and sort this out.

Should you worry? Well, you obviously are worried or you wouldn't have written in to me. What you are describing could be roundworms, also called ascarids, or this could also be tapeworms. Some of these intestinal parasites require an intermediate host, such as the earthworm, slug or fish in order for the definitive host to develop them. Ascarids are fairly easy to diagnose through fecal parasite examination, performed by your herp veterinarian. Tapeworms can be more difficult to diagnose, as the eggs are not shed as frequently in the feces. It might be helpful if you can collect some of this thin, white-clear, stringlike material and place it in a small jar of isopropyl alcohol (rubbing alcohol) so that your herp vet can examine it or perhaps send it out to a lab for identification.

Most parasites are easy to eradicate through the use of appropriate anthelmintics (dewormers). This is not something that you should attempt to diagnose and treat on your own. Some dewormers are potentially dangerous and some can cause fatalities in chelonians (turtles, tortoises and terrapins). The dosage for dewormers should be based on the herp's body weight, measured in grams, for precise administration. Your vet may decide to prophylactically deworm your slider, even if the fecal parasite exam is negative, because there is a suspicion that your turtle might be harboring intestinal parasites.

Because you tell me that you haven't changed the husbandry, implying that the temperature of the water and air are the same as usual, then I would be less concerned about your turtle having developed an intestinal infection with bacteria or fungi. However, because this would be a possibility from what you described, testing for these problems might be warranted, especially if the condition of the water in the habitat is less than stellar.

This does not sound like a cloacal prolapse at all. When this occurs, red tissue will protrude from the cloaca. You wouldn't see strings or strands of white mucus or white tissue being passed out of the vent intermittently.

Because you have noticed that your slider appears more timid than usual, and any behavioral changes can indicate a medical problem, then that is one more reason why I would recommend that you take your turtle in to see your herp vet. If you don't yet have one, call some local pet retailers or herp breeders in your area to see who they use and recommend for veterinary care. You can also call some local veterinarians who don't treat herps to see who they recommend. Even if you don't have any experienced herp vets nearby, you can take your slider in to see a willing vet, and you can suggest that he or she take advantage of the consultation service offered by most large veterinary labs. This is usually a free service offered to veterinarians who use the lab, so your veterinarian can consult with an experienced herp veterinarian who can go over husbandry, diagnostic tests, differential diagnoses and possible treatments. This can prove invaluable to vets just getting involved with herps, those who see a small caseload of herps or those just wanting a second opinion or help with a difficult case.

I do think that you should make an appointment with a herp vet as soon as possible, and if you can, bring in a fresh stool sample and some of the white material that your turtle has been passing (in rubbing alcohol, as discussed previously). Also, make sure that you can provide your vet with the temperature range in the tank's water, the ambient air temperature, the temperature under the focal basking hot spot, the method of filtration you use for the tank's water, the diet you offer, any supplements that you use, any water conditioners that you use when you change the water, as well as any other pertinent information that you might have regarding your slider. That data will help your herp vet assess your husbandry, which is often the root of any medical problems.

Good luck with your turtle. It is not commonly known that water turtles are among the most difficult herps to properly maintain. Hopefully, whatever this white stuff that your slider has been passing will turn out to be a minor problem, but I do feel that it is worth having the turtle examined and diagnosed.

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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.