

# EMERGENCY FIRST AID FOR TURTLES



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## **Introduction**

The best way to keep your turtles healthy is through proper care and good education. Keeping your turtles properly fed, keeping their water clean, and giving them the proper quality and quantity of light will go a long way to produce happy, healthy turtles.

Unfortunately, even the most informed, well-meaning turtle keepers will run into trouble from time to time. This guide will help to quickly identify any problems before they cause any major trouble. It is very important to act quickly when it comes to your animal's health, whether that means a do-it-yourself remedy, or a quick trip to the Vet.

## **Disease Prevention**

The best way to treat turtle disease is to prevent it from happening in the first place. The popular saying "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is especially true when it comes to turtle care.

The number one reason for sick or diseased turtles is poor water quality. Creating a healthy tank environment for your turtle is an absolute necessity.

When setting up a turtle's aquarium, there is a seemingly never-ending supply of filtration options. It is imperative that you take quality into account. A few bucks saved on cheap filtration will be of little comfort after the expense of the medication kicks in. Be sure to do your research when setting up the filtration system, as there are some very advantageous systems.

One of the most overlooked devices in turtle care is the UV sterilizer. The cost of these devices may seem a bit excessive at first, but a closer look into what they actually do may ease your concerns. UV sterilizers are not merely for algae control, but also great for disease prevention.

Algae, bacteria, parasites, and anything else passing by the powerful ultraviolet rays of the sterilizer will be instantly neutralized, creating a clean, disease-free environment. A carefully planned filtration system will go a long ways towards a healthy turtle.

The other important points to creating a healthy home life for your turtle are lighting and food. Education is the key to success for most pet care endeavors, and turtles are no exception. It is important to learn the needs of your new pet.



Giving him the proper light quality and quantity, and providing him with a proper enclosure and good nutrition will almost guarantee success. Meeting the environmental needs is a necessity for keeping your turtle healthy. Deviating from just one aspect can lead to stress, and stress almost always leads to disease.

## Identifying Trouble - Common Turtle Ailments

### *Ear Infection*

**Symptoms** – Bump on side of the head, localized collection of puss, cheek inflammation

**Diagnosis** – Ear Infection

**Cause** – Poor Water Quality

**What to do** - Schedule a Veterinary visit. Although there has been anecdotal evidence of success with home surgery, see a qualified Veterinarian as soon as possible.

This will require surgery, including anesthesia. There will be an incision to the affected area, and it will be flushed with an antiseptic solution. The Vet will then prescribe antibiotics to ensure that there is no further infection.



### *Respiratory Infection*

**Symptoms** – Coughing, Runny Nose, Improper or unbalanced swimming, excess mucous production

**Diagnosis** – Respiratory Infection

**Cause** – Improper Care, Poor water quality

**What to do** - Education is very important for proper care of your pet turtle. Infections such as this can result from an enclosure that is improperly heated, improperly lit, or improperly cleaned. The most common cause is excessively cold or drafty conditions in temperate or tropical turtles.

This can lead to pneumonia, a potentially fatal condition. It is very important to carefully observe your turtle for any signs of the condition worsening. This would signify a Vet appointment immediately.



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If caught quickly, you can try a warm bath of about 85 degrees Fahrenheit for about a week or so. Be sure the water level is not too high, as the warm water can cause drowning. Antibiotics may have to be administered following a visit to the Vet

## *Shell Disease*

**Symptoms** – Soft Shell, except in soft-shell species, Soft spots on carapace

**Diagnosis** - Shell Disease

**Cause** – Poor Water Quality, Vitamin Deficiency, Calcium Deficiency

**What to do** – Be sure to keep tank clean! Healthy water equals healthy turtles! Increase or improve calcium supplementation, and beware of lighting requirements for your turtle species. Inadequate UVB light can commonly cause this ailment. Shell problems have a knack for being slow healing issues. They can also be recurring, so be sure to correct the problem that caused it in the first place.

## *Shell rot*

**Symptoms** – Patches of white on the carapace of the turtle, may be fuzzy, may be gray or white

**Diagnosis** – Shell rot

**Cause** – Poor Water Quality, Improper Lighting, Vitamin D Deficiency, Improper Housing

**What to do** – Poor Water Quality is a serious issue with many potentially serious conditions resulting. Turtle water must be kept clean, and carefully monitored, especially when dealing with a sick or stressed turtle. Be sure your turtle has a spot in his tank to dry off.

Most species will need to be able to sit somewhere completely dry to prevent such infections. Make sure you know your turtles lighting requirements! If he needs UVB or full spectrum light, this could result in insufficient vitamin D production, leading to any number of problems.

Have your Vet recommend a good antifungal medication. There are several commonly available either through the vet or your local pet store that will help the recovery. The medication will need to be



applied several times a day for up to three weeks to ensure the fungus is completely gone. Remember, fungus likes cool damp areas, so keep your turtle warm and make sure he can dry off!

## Recommended Terrapin Health Conditioner



### TetraFauna ReptoGuard Turtle Health Conditioner 3 Count, Slow-Release (19514)

- **TURTLE HEALTH CONDITIONER** Slow-release dissolving blocks help create a healthier environment for aquatic turtles amphibians and other reptiles
- **CONTROLS DISEASES** Controls a variety of common diseases and disease-causing organisms including salmonella for the safety of aquatic turtles and their owners
- **SLOW RELEASE** Each sulfa-medicated block dissolves slowly and lasts up to 60 days

[>Check Price On Amazon](#)

### Swollen Eye Syndrome

**Symptoms** – Closed eyes, bulging eyes, flaking skin

**Diagnosis** – Swollen Eye Syndrome (SES)

**Cause** – Generally SES is caused by vitamin A deficiency, but poor water quality, and high chlorine concentrations have also been known to contribute.

**What to do** – Be sure to always use a dechlorinator, or a water source that does not contain chlorine or chloramines. Recently, municipal water systems began replacing chlorine with chloramines, which contain ammonia to stabilize the chlorine molecule.

Be sure to check with your local water company to see what they use as many water conditioners do not remove chloramines. Also, be sure you are using a reputable vitamin A supplement.

Be aware of expiration dates, as there is evidence that vitamin supplements have a short shelf life when it comes to maintaining usable vitamin sources. Always keep a clean tank. Overfeeding is the number one culprit with poor water quality.

## **Other Common Problems**

**Shell Algae** – Sometime Algae will grow on the carapace. This is a normal and very common condition. If growth is in excess, it can be removed with an algae sponge or a regular toothbrush.

**Cracked or Broken Shell** – Usually occurs with careless handling, but can also be caused by falls onto pointed rockwork. Be sure to correct the condition that led to the crack.

Shell cracks can be brought to the Vet or repaired at home depending on your comfort level.

The wound will need to be cleaned with an antiseptic solution and closed with an epoxy. Your vet may prescribe antibiotics to prevent infection.

**Intestinal Infection** – Constipation and diarrhea are common side effects of poor or improper diet. Education is very important, refer to your Vet for proper diet information and correct their food intake at once. If there is a lack of turtle excrement, you can be sure the diet is to blame.

**Lack of Appetite** – Turtles are fussy eaters and may not want what you are feeding them. Also beware of near hibernation temperatures. Check for proper heater function. Stress is another common cause, be aware of newly acquired specimens. Also check for symptoms of illness.

## **Serious Conditions**

**Salmonella** – Although a rarity in the turtle industry, it has become infamous and almost synonymous with turtle care. Made popular through media hype, salmonella is the number one reason turtles were legislated and why people still have inherent caution about hygiene around them.

Nonetheless, Salmonella is a very serious condition whose symptoms include diarrhea, lethargic behavior, and lack of appetite.

If suspected, bring your turtle to the Vet immediately, followed directly by a trip to the hospital yourself. Salmonella is transmitted through contaminated food, water, and feces. Always exercise caution when it comes to personal hygiene and turtles.



**Vitamin K Deficiency** – Bring to the Vet as soon as possible to rule out other, more serious conditions. This is common in turtles with poor diets, especially those lacking in vegetables. Common symptoms include bleeding from the mouth for no apparent reason. A change of diet will be necessary, so consult your Veterinarian for assistance.

**Bleeding due to bites or injuries** – It is very important to stop the bleeding as soon as possible to prevent loss of consciousness. The flow needs to be constricted and cooled to slow the bleeding. Sodium Bicarbonate (Baking Soda) may be used for slower blood flow.

The wound will need to be treated with an antiseptic to prevent infection. The turtle will need exceptionally clean water conditions following an injury, as they are very prone to infection. The wound will need to be cleaned consistently to observe healing progress. If infection is detected, it must be brought to a Vet for antibiotics.

**Rock Ingestion** – Turtle should be brought to Vet immediately. Although some people have had success with forceps removal, the turtle will require X-rays from a qualified Veterinarian to ensure that there is no further damage. Death can occur if left unchecked.



**Drowning** – Turtles may be alive yet unconscious as they can survive long periods of time without oxygen. Use caution to never a turtle upside down when unconscious. This may cause suffocation and death. To attempt revival, extend head and tilt head down. Watch for water to fall out.

After the water has stopped, extend front legs outward and pull and push until no more water escapes. At this point you need to bring him to the Vet immediately. The Vet may need to administer oxygen and antibiotics.

**Prolapse** – This is a very unusual condition in which an internal organ falls outside the shell. It is an unpreventable and in most cases harmless condition. Be vigilant in making sure the turtle doesn't hurt itself in this vulnerable time, and be sure to keep its internal organs moist.

Place it in water about 76 degrees Fahrenheit if necessary to maintain moisture. If this continues, set up an appointment with your Vet. There are a few procedures that can be done, and you can talk about possible antibiotics.

## **Emergency First Aid**

**Bleeding** – Bleeding is a major problem and needs to be resolved at once. If possible, constrict or cool the wound, and if truly serious, bring to the Vet for fluid replacement.

**Unconsciousness** – Animals that are badly injured will often go into shock. If available, always follow the minimum dosage of shock treatment. See a Vet as soon as possible.

**Breathing** – Be very aware of anything restricting the turtles breathing, be it blood, fractures, or objects. Get to the Vet as soon as possible at the first sign of respiratory distress.

## **Visiting the Vet**

Finding a qualified Veterinarian should be one of the first things you do after you bring your new turtle home. Even if you do not plan on having regular checkups, during an emergency situation, there is no time to waste.

The best way to find a local reptile specialist is generally to ask around. Ask your local pet stores or even your neighborhood veterinarian.

For your own reference, check out the Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians at [www.arav.org](http://www.arav.org). There you will find a good list of knowledgeable Vets.



You should establish a good relationship with your vet. They will become familiar with your animal and could help fix problems before they even happen.

## **F.A.Q.**

### **Q – I just got a turtle. Do they need to go to the Vet?**

A – Not exactly. You should have a knowledgeable vet on hand for any emergencies that may arise. Although health checkups aren't exactly a requirement for turtle care, they certainly are a good idea. At the least they can offer a good diagnosis and some good opinions if you have any questions about your new pet.

### **Q – Why is my turtle's shell soft?**

A – Either it's a soft-shell turtle, or you're in some trouble. Generally it's a calcium or UVB deficiency. Be sure to keep your turtle's aquarium clean, and give him proper food and light.

### **Q – Where can I find a good Turtle Vet?**

A – Check out the Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians at [www.arav.org](http://www.arav.org). You can also ask around at local area pet stores or your neighborhood vet's office.

### **Q – Is my turtle supposed to have white fuzzy spots on its shell?**

A – No. It sounds like a fungal infection, and you'll need some medicine. Visit your local pet shop or Vet and get an anti-fungal medication. You again will have to make sure you keep your turtle's home clean!

### **Q – My turtle lost his leg. Is he going to die?**

A – Probably not. As long as you keep the wound from becoming infected, it will heal over just fine.



### **Q - Help! My turtle is bleeding!**

A – Stop the bleeding as soon as possible by constricting the wound, cooling it down, or adding Baking Soda if possible. If severe, bring to your vet immediately for fluid replacement.

## **Turtle First Aid Quiz**

### *Questions*

1. How do you stop a turtle from bleeding?
2. What do you do if you turtle swallows a rock?
3. How do you get rid of algae on the turtle's shell?
4. How do you prevent most turtle diseases?
5. How do I get rid of fungus?



### *Answers*

1. Constrict and cool the wound, and add baking soda if possible.
2. Bring to the vet immediately. This could be life threatening
3. With a soft algae sponge or tooth brush
4. Good water quality and education. Know your turtle's dietary and lighting requirements.
5. Anti-fungal medication.

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