

## **Introduction to Iguana Care**

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Iguanas are fast becoming popular pets. These lizards are native to Mexico and Central America and are accustomed to very warm days and slightly cooler nights. They enjoy climbing branches and basking in the sunlight.

The information contained in this article will help acquaint you with your new iguana and its basic needs. This will aid you in providing the best care for your pet as well as help you avoid many of the problems experienced by others who have kept iguanas as pets. Your iguana will be happier, healthier and will live longer as a result.

### **Housing**

The primary goal of caging is to insure your iguana's safety. The cage should allow the iguana to turn around and enjoy normal exercise. This includes climbing and a place to hide. The size of the cage depends on the size of the iguana. As a general rule, as much space as possible should be given. A minimum would be an enclosure that is twice as long as your iguana is from the tip of her nose to the tip of her tail. It should also be, at a minimum, as wide as the iguana from nose to tail tip. You must consider that a full grown iguana can be as large as 4 to 5 feet in length, including the tail. Iguanas of this size ideally need a whole room to themselves!

The ability to clean your iguana's cage is another important consideration. The cage should have a solid bottom, and be constructed of a substance easy to clean. Glass, hard plastics, and stainless steel are good materials. Wooden cages should not be used, as they are difficult to clean and disinfect.

Regular cleaning of the cage is very important. Uneaten food should be removed daily. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least once a week. The cage can be cleaned with a mild soap solution, and then disinfected with a solution of 1 cap Clorox bleach to 1 gallon of water. Your local pet store should also carry cleaning solutions specifically designed for reptiles. Betadine, Nolvasan, and Roccal are other commercial products that are available for disinfecting. **MAKE SURE TO RINSE THE CAGE WELL**, and dry it thoroughly before returning the iguana.

Props are very important for the well being of your iguana. Logs, rocks and plants (real or artificial) provide spaces to exercise and hide. It can be very stressful for an iguana to have no place to hide. Rearrange the props in your pet's enclosure often to help prevent her from becoming bored. It is important that all props are cleaned on a regular basis.

### **Lighting**

A UVA/UVB light should be used 10 or more hours per day all year long. Iguanas that do not get the amount of UV light they need lose bone density and become susceptible to multiple fractures (similar to osteoporosis in humans.)

Natural sunlight, when available, is a preferred source. Windows (glass) and aquariums filter out much of the beneficial sunlight. Placing the cage or aquarium with a screen top by an opened window or a SAFE place outside for a portion of the day is one option during warm weather. Your iguana should always have a shaded area to use if he chooses. Giving your iguana warm and cool areas in his enclosure allows him to regulate his body temperature.

An ultraviolet light that emits both UVA and UVB should be used year round. These bulbs will stop emitting the necessary UV rays long before the bulb itself burns out. Change the UV bulbs at least every six months to be sure your iguana is getting the rays it needs. UV light is invisible! Your bulb may still emit visible light but not produce any UV light. Date your bulbs and change them every 6 months even if they are still emitting visible light. Note that fluorescent UV lights do not produce heat and must be used in addition to a heat source. Any lights should be placed where your iguana cannot climb on or come in contact with them.

### **Bedding**

Several types of bedding are available. Two recommended materials are paper and indoor/outdoor carpeting (this looks like artificial grass or turf and is washable). These products are easily obtained, clean, safe, and inexpensive. Although corncob, wood shavings, sand and gravel are commonly used as bedding material WE DO NOT RECOMMEND THEM. They are associated with multiple health problems. These products can be eaten by your reptile and result in an impaction that requires surgery to remove. Also, bacteria and fungi are able to grow in these substrates and dust from them can irritate the eyes and respiratory system of your iguana. Shavings, corncob, sand, and gravel are also difficult to keep clean.

### **Diet**

Iguanas are folivores (leaf eaters) in the wild. They should be raised strictly on plant-based diets, with protein coming from a plant source. Dark, leafy greens are the closest we can get to providing iguanas food that resembles the foliage they would consume in the wild. Rip the greens into pieces a little larger than the

iguana's head and serve them by themselves in a heaping pile. For fun and a natural feeding activity, hang a whole leaf from the top of the enclosure so that it dangles inside, and let the iguana grab and tear at it as he would in the wild.

Iguanas DO NOT require animal proteins (fish, poultry, beef, dairy, eggs, insects, etc). In fact, these foods can harm your pet's kidneys and, in the worst cases, cause death due to kidney failure.

We do not recommend feeding tofu to your iguana. Although tofu is a plant based protein, it is high in fat and can impede calcium absorption.

Iguanas DO NOT need bird gravel. Please do not give it to them!

A basic iguana diet should include the following: water cress, dandelion (including flowers), spinach, kale, romaine, escarole, mustard greens (including flowers), collards, yellow wax beans, parsley, blackberries, turnip greens, green onions, and okra.

You may also feed alfalfa pellets (found in many rabbit foods) mixed with vegetables or fruits (which will break the pellets down due to their moisture content). Alfalfa pellets provide a good source of protein and calcium.

Other foods to supplement an iguana's diet: apples, cantaloupe, kiwi fruit, cabbage, Napa cabbage, mango, squash, carrots, Brussels sprout, sweet potatoes, cauliflower, broccoli, green beans, bananas, bok choy, radish, red/green/yellow bell peppers and blueberries. Most fruits and vegetables are okay to give your iguana, if you have an unusual fruit or vegetable, please ask before giving it.

None of the above supplemental items should be fed exclusively. A mixture of many is recommended. When fed in excess, vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprout, kale, cabbage, cauliflower, and bok choy can cause hypothyroidism (a thyroid deficiency). These vegetables may be fed in small amounts, in addition to the basic diet of fruits and vegetables.

Spinach, rhubarb, beets and chards are high in oxalic acid, and may cause gout over a period of time. Additionally, these foods bind calcium, effectively preventing the body from utilizing the dietary calcium. This can cause metabolic bone disease, a condition in which the bones lose their density and become prone to breaking. Feed these in moderation.

Try to feed fresh vegetables as often as possible, as some of the green vegetables lose their thiamin as a result of being frozen. However, keep a bag of frozen mixed vegetables on hand in case of an emergency.

Fruits should compose the smallest part of the iguana's diet. Most fruits are very low in calcium and often fairly high in phosphorus. Although iguanas almost always accept bananas, they should not become a major component of their diet.

There are several edible flowers that you can grow yourself or buy in the produce section (not flower section) of the grocery store or plant nursery. Be sure that they have not been treated with pesticides of any kind. Edible plants include: hibiscus (flowers and leaves), nasturtium (flowers and leaves), rose petals, violets (flowers and leaves), and geraniums.

You may find that your iguana has definite color and shape preferences when it comes to food. For example, he might pick collards as his favorite. The next foods you could try mixing in would be other dark green foods like parsley, broccoli, etc. If he likes carrots, try introducing sweet potato. Experiment! An iguana that will not eat fresh sweet potato, may eat cooked mashed sweet potato. Use a vegetable peeler to make shavings of food or chop into small pieces. Iguanas prefer to swallow much of their food whole.

It is also recommended that a powdered reptile vitamin supplement be sprinkled over the food once weekly. A calcium supplement without phosphorus (e.g. Rep-Cal) should be given three or four times weekly.

## **Water**

Water should be available to your iguana at all times. A low-sided bowl or container is best. The container should be washed and fresh water given on a daily basis. In addition to a water bowl, your iguana should be misted with water daily. Some iguanas prefer to drink water droplets left on the sides of their enclosure.

## **Taking your Iguana Outdoors**

If you would like to bring your pet outside, there are a few things to consider. First, make sure that the temperature will be comfortable (70-90 degrees). Remember that your pet cannot regulate his body temperature by sweating or shivering the way we do. The only way your pet can warm or cool herself is by moving to a warmer or cooler location. Second, iguanas can move with amazing speed when they want to! They can also climb very well. A cat harness and leash will help avoid the heartbreak of losing your pet when you take her outside. Finally, keep a close eye on your pet, and protect her from contact with predators such as dogs, cats, hawks, etc.

## **Recommended Exam Schedule**

We recommend a yearly physical examination for your iguana to be sure she is healthy. The signs of poor health in iguanas can be subtle and if they are not recognized early, it can be too late to successfully treat a problem. Also, it is possible for iguanas to get internal parasites and have them for a long period of time before they display any symptoms. Because of this, we recommend a yearly fecal test. We also recommend a yearly blood test to check calcium and phosphorus levels. This will ensure that your iguana's dietary needs are being met and will allow us to

address any deficiencies before they cause a major problem such as metabolic bone disease.

## **Bathing**

Iguanas are great swimmers. Putting them in water a few times a week will not only give them a little exercise, it will help them shed their skin (when going through a shed). Warm water will stimulate a reptile to empty its bowels and bladder. This can be used on a constipated iguana, or as part of a schedule to help prevent unwanted accidents. We recommend that you use a separate container for bathing your iguana. Any reptile can carry salmonella bacteria and you do not want to expose yourself to it by using the same tub as your iguana.

Clean your pet's tub and rinse it well before and after use. The water should be warm, not hot. Filling the tub 1/3 to ½ full should be adequate for a healthy iguana. Never put a sickly or weak iguana in water over its head. You may find your iguana changes color when bathing. This is normal. Also, you may see him breathing or puffing more than usual. These are signs that he is adjusting to the temperature of the water.

## **Salmonella**

Any reptile may be carrying salmonella, even animals that are perfectly healthy. Many reptiles are persistently infected. This means that they harbor the bacteria in their bodies and at times of stress begin to shed the bacteria into their environment. The most common sources of stress are inappropriate habitats and poor diet. If you follow the guidelines in this handout, you will be doing everything you can to keep your iguanas healthy and stress-free. The healthier your pets are, the less the risk that they will shed salmonella.

It is safest, however, to assume that your reptile is always shedding salmonella. Be sure to wash your hands after handling your iguana. It is especially important to supervise any small children. Prevent access to the enclosure when you are unable to watch them. Children and immunosuppressed individuals are at most risk of serious illness. Instruct older children of the importance of hand washing after touching a reptile or its habitat (ex. water, basking spot, or anything inside of the enclosure).

## **Other Diseases**

Most diseases in iguanas result from dirty enclosures, poor diets, and cool temperatures. Proper care of your iguana will greatly reduce the incidence of disease. Diseases in iguanas often come on very slowly. It can be difficult to detect these diseases before they become advanced.

Knowing what is normal for your iguana is very important. Become familiar with your iguana's normal appetite, activity level, amount and frequency of urination and defecation, appearance of waste products, and the general appearance of your

reptile. A change in one of these normal parameters may be a sign of disease. If you notice a change in your iguana, observe him very closely. If the signs or symptoms persist for one or two days, or you notice new signs/symptoms, please call us for an appointment. The sooner we are able to address a problem, the more successful we will be in treating it. Bloody waste products, heavy breathing or panting, seizures, bloody discharges and lameness may suggest an emergency. Call us immediately if you notice any of the above.

### **Questions**

Please call us at any time with questions or concerns regarding your iguana. We are here to help you keep your pet happy and healthy for a lifetime!