



McMASTER & HEAP VETERINARY PRACTICE

CARING FOR TURTLES



Foot injury needing veterinary attention.

Turtle Facts:

Turtles are not your average pets. They are fascinating creatures that aren't particularly complicated to care for as long as you invest a little time and have the right equipment, you can enjoy them for a possible 25 to 40 years!

Pet turtles in NZ are usually red-eared sliders or snake necks. Turtles are cold blooded so regulate their temperature from their environment, moving between sunning area and the layers of warm and cool water.

Turtles have hard shells made up of around 60 bones covered by plates called scutes. Scutes are shed once or twice a year and can be easily scratched by minor trauma or softened by prolonged immersion in warm water. When they bask in the sun, their scutes dry and firm back up.

The shell is part of its skeleton which is attached to the spine and the rib cage so they can't crawl out of it. They can feel pressure and pain through their shells, just as you can feel pressure through your fingernails.

Environment

Turtles can grow to be 13-28cm in length so they will need a relatively large enclosure. An outdoor enclosure is the best place for your turtles – one with water to swim, rocks to sunbathe on and some shelter under which to keep cool.

If you are going to keep your turtle in an aquarium, it is very important to keep it clean. Turtles are messy eaters so the water needs to be changed regularly & good filter is essential.

Plenty of natural light is good, but they also need special UV bulbs and a heat lamp. A full spectrum UVA/UVB reptile light is necessary for the production of calcium and maintenance of the hardness of their shells. The ideal temperature in an aquarium should be carefully monitored and in the correct range.

Gravel is not necessary, and very small gravel can be ingested by your turtle and this can cause blockage problems. Use stones that are large enough not to be swallowed or river rocks.

Diet

A healthy, balanced diet for turtles consists of a wide variety of foods, from snails to alfalfa. Red-eared turtles are omnivores, eating mostly meat when young and becoming vegetarian as they age and need less protein. Juveniles turtles (up to 1yr old) should be fed twice a day and adults every second day. They can only feed in water.

Turtles like to eat worms, snails, insects, fish and boiled chicken. The plants they prefer include most varieties found in tropical fish tanks, plus lettuce, cabbage, alfalfa, and berries. Turtle food bought from a pet shop contains essential vitamins and minerals including calcium, which is needed for the development of the shell. A poor diet results in a soft shell and a lethargic pet.

Do not feed - Red meat or processed meat. Cat or dog food, avocado, spinach, silverbeet, peas, corn, cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli, fruits, raw chicken, rhubarb, beetroot, tomato, celery

Turtle Problems

If your Turtle has the correct diet and environment it is unlikely to get ill or have problems but there are a few things to look out for.

These include: Soft shell syndrome (Metabolic Bone Disease): a result of poor diet and/or insufficient lighting. Fungal infections: a cotton-like layer on the shell, eyes or mouth. Respiratory infections: Wheezing, lethargy, a runny nose and loss of appetite, all due to an environment that is too cold.

If you see any of these symptoms in your pet, make sure you take them to us for assessment and treatment.

I really enjoy looking after the turtles that come through our vet clinic. They are beautiful, amazing and resilient creatures. There is never a dull moment at work and you never know what creatures we will treat next!

Dr Sara Hodgson BVSc BSc

A special thank you to Donna who runs the Turtle Rescue in Christchurch who helped supply some of the information used. To see what Donna does or for detailed information on turtle care visit her website: turtleinfo@paradise.net.nz



A pile of scutes which were removed to reveal a healing healthy shell beneath.

OPEN 7 DAYS

**Cnr Hoon Hay & Coppell Place
Phone 338 2534, Fax 339 8624**

**E. mcmasterandheap@yahoo.co.nz
www.mcmasterheap.co.nz**



McMaster & Heap