

Green Iguana



Common Name: Iguana - green

Scientific Name: Iguana iguana

Related: spiny-tail iguana, cyclura iguana, marine iguana

Origin or Range: Mexico, Central America, northern South America, Caribbean islands, feral in Florida

Size: average adult 4-6 feet total length, 13-18 inches snout-to-vent

Possible Lifespan: 15-20 years, but due to hostile transport conditions from their native habitat, poor pet store care, as well as incorrect or incomplete husbandry information of owners, it is estimated that up to 90% of imported iguanas die within a year. Those that survive this crucial period may average a lifespan of 8-12 years depending on gender and disease exposure

Compatibility: All iguanas are taken from the wild and thus must be tamed to be good pets. They are intelligent.

Animal Description and Routine Care:

The green iguana is usually but not always green. All remaining information here pertains to the "green" iguana, not the other genera and species of iguanas. Depending on where it came from, it may be mostly orange. Adult male iguanas will generally have some orange patches when they are in mating season. Juvenile iguanas are bright green and lack the black stripes on some parts of adults. Distinguishing characteristics of iguanas are a row of spikes protruding above the spine and continuing down the tail, a dangling flap of skin called the dewlap under the chin, and a rather large round spike called the sub-tympanic scale under the clear ear opening.

Iguanas can break off parts of their tail due to impact or infection. A new but different looking tail segment will regenerate. This new section will be smooth rather than roughly scaled and be black or grey in color.

In the wild, iguanas are typically found in the upper parts of trees, where they eat mostly leaves and capture the ultraviolet B rays of the sun that aid in their digestion and bone growth. For this reason they are called folivores rather than carnivores, omnivores or herbivores. In captivity they are also offered selected fruits and vegetables such as butternut squash, yams, parsnips, apples, strawberries, papaya or kiwi, to name some safe and popular choices. Captive choices for greens include collards, mustards, dandelions, escarole and endive. Lettuce has no nutritive value and some other fruits and vegetables are harmful to iguanas, so before choosing fresh food, please check one of two quality paperback books: Iguanas for Dummies, by Melissa Kaplan, or Green Iguana: The Ultimate Owner's Manual, by James Hatfield. Be warned that most of the other iguana books contain outdated or incorrect information on nutrition as well as other subjects. In particular, dog or cat food, insects or meat table scraps can cause severe kidney damage in iguanas. Although no commercial iguana diet is recommended as a staple food, Rep-Cal brand pelleted iguana food has some good nutrition and most importantly

can be soaked and sprinkled on top of the iguana salad to provide hydration. A water pan for soaking or frequent tubbing or showering also assist with hydration. Finally, it is important to supplement iguana salad with small amounts of powdered vitamins and calcium such as Rep-Cal Herptivite and Calcium once or twice a week.

Since wild iguanas reside in trees and only rarely spend time on the ground to forage or dig nests, a tall cage will make them feel as much at home as possible. Recommended minimum dimensions are 4 feet x 5 feet x 6 feet, with stout climbing branches, ladders and/or shelves to allow them to move from place to place. Newspaper or thin felt indoor-outdoor carpet make the best substrate or floor cover. Never use wood chips, shavings, sand or mulch. In addition to preventing boredom, the reason for facilitating moving from place to place within the cage is thermoregulation. Because iguanas are "cold blooded" animals, they must move from a warmer to a cooler place when they get too hot, and the opposite when they are too cold for their comfort and well-being. To maneuver in trees in the wild and in cages in captivity, iguanas have long, sharp claws that must be retained at least at some short length, but must be kept clipped to avoid inflicting serious scratches on the owner. Another weapon is the long tail that has sharp spikes on the top and can whip hard and quickly. Finally, even though iguanas are folivores or herbivores, they have powerful jaws containing many sharp teeth and can easily bite off a human finger.

In an appropriate residence and household it may be possible to set up a "freeroaming" arrangement for an iguana. Freeroaming means that the iguana's base of operations is not a cage but rather a more open environment such as shelves attached to a wall or a small bedroom or closet of its own. This presumes that the iguana is tame and not a hazard to humans or other pets. Also, whether caged or freeroaming, there are some heating and lighting essentials that, if not strictly followed, will cause the iguana to become sick.

Iguanas require a basking spot similar to their treetop, sun-drenched location in the wild. In a cage or in a freeroaming area the basking spot should have a temperature of 95 degrees and exposure to significant ultraviolet B light. Combined or separate fixtures may be used to hold the necessary heating and lighting equipment. Ceramic heat emitters give off heat but no light and come in a variety of wattages for different sized spaces. While many owners turn these off at night, especially in a cool house others may prefer to keep them on. The advantage of CHEs over ordinary basking lights is that there is no light to disturb the iguana's sleep if it is left on. Another essential component is a high-quality ultraviolet B source. Not all fluorescent or "full spectrum" tubes sold in pet stores are good enough for iguanas. The Zoo Med Repti-Sun 10.0 tube is among the most trustworthy and comes in a variety of lengths to fit various cages and basking sites. These are typically attached to a timer so they aren't on at night but are on for about 12 hours a day. Another type of UV source is the mercury vapor bulb. These are newer and still controversial in some circles. A good source of information about the best of these is www.reptileuv.com. Iguana UV bulbs and heat bulbs are available for sale at Internet pet stores such as www.llreptile.com, www.beanfarm.com, and www.bigappleherp.com as well as at many local pet stores. The last bit of heating equipment needed is a heating pad made for *people*, sold in drug stores, not in pet stores. Be sure to read the box to be sure that there is *no* automatic shut-off timer in the heating pad. The iguana may want to lie on it day or night.

Veterinary Care Information:

Relative Care Ease: Complex

Like all other kinds of pets, iguanas and other reptiles should have periodic checkups with a qualified veterinarian as well as prompt treatment in the case of illness. Every new pet reptile should be checked for external parasites like ticks and mites and for internal parasites that can cause a great deal of unseen damage. To check for internal parasites, take a fresh fecal (poop) sample in a damp paper towel in a ziplock sandwich bag promptly to your reptile veterinarian, who will be able to determine what kind of parasite the iguana has and the proper medication to treat it. After the treatment is completed, it is important to re-test the iguana because not all of the parasites may have been killed. This reoccurrence of parasites is one good reason for an annual checkup.

Another common problem that reptile veterinarians see in iguanas is metabolic bone disease (MBD). Iguanas with MBD may have misshapen jaws, legs or spines. MBD is caused by a lack of calcium in the iguana's diet or inability to metabolize dietary calcium properly, usually because of inadequate heat or UVB light.

Adult (two years or older) female iguanas can be expected to produce about 50 eggs a year whether or not they have been mated. Sometimes these eggs are resorbed, but if you observe your female iguana growing wider but not eating, or digging and scratching in the cage or house, you should suspect that she is gravid (making eggs). Please read the reference materials for details on how to make a nest box for your iguana. Without proper conditions the female iguana may retain her eggs and not lay them. This condition, called dystocia, is potentially fatal because retained eggs will rot and become infected. A good precaution is to take any female iguana that you suspect is gravid to your reptile veterinarian to confirm it with an x-ray or blood test. Your vet will advise you about adding extra calcium to the diet and when to expect the eggs to be laid. If they aren't laid on schedule, the iguana may have dystocia and have to be spayed to save her life.

These are just a few of the reasons why every iguana owner should have a reptile veterinarian check the iguana regularly. Other reasons might include removal of jaw abscesses, antibiotic treatment for mouth rot or other infections, removal of an infected or partly broken tail, or diagnosis of tumors.

Finding a Reptile Veterinarian:

Local Yellow Pages under Veterinarians advertising "Exotics" or Reptiles

www.anapsid.org , link at left side bottom of home page

www.herpvetconnection.com , vets that have been recommended

www.arav.org , members of the Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians

Internet Iguana References:

www.anapsid.org , large section on iguanas by Melissa Kaplan

www.greenigsociety.org , extensive discussion of iguanas

To join e-mail discussion groups about iguanas, first become a member of www.yahoo.com by defining a user ID and password, if you don't already have one. Then go to www.yahogroups.com and sign in with your Yahoo ID and password. In the search window, one listing at a time, search for IguanaMail, IguanaDen, BabyIguana, AdvancedIguanaCare, HerpNutrition, ExoticPetsGardening and/or ReptileRescueTransportation, depending on your iguana interests. There are also online chat rooms about iguanas.

Special Issues:

Please contact Sue, the author of this care sheet, at SSue@post.harvard.edu .