

Turtle Care Guide

Turtles are gentle aquatic creatures that emerge from the water to bask in the sunlight. Most turtles are “look at” pets and don’t particularly like to be stroked or cuddled.

There are a variety of different turtle species kept as pets, and each one has different needs and requirements. We recommend doing further research on the specific type of turtle you're looking to adopt to ensure you provide it with the best environment to flourish in.

Environment and Housing



A minimum three foot tank is required for a juvenile turtle, although bigger is always better. Some smaller species may be housed in a two foot tank provided there is ample water depth while they are a young hatchling, but will require significant tank upgrades over time. An adult turtle should ideally have a four foot tank, and some species such as red ears are best if moved to outdoor ponds.

Turtles require a decent diving space, and should have a minimum 2.5 times their shell length (e.g. a 10cm hatchling turtle should have at least 25cm of diving depth). The length of swim area should be at least five times the

length of the turtle, and three times the width.

All tanks need a large basking area, most turtle tanks will come with one dock, and it is a good idea to add extra flat stones or driftwood around this to increase the overall basking area. Some species of turtles (such as Red Ear Sliders) spend more time basking and will need additional dry areas.

The dry area/dock must be situated underneath a heated basking lamp, this helps replicate a warm sun and encourage basking, as well as a UV lamp.

Turtles should not be housed together. In some instances with large outdoor ponds and ample space this may work, but overall turtles do not mix well with fish or other aquatic companions and will be happiest on their own with an enriching and well-kept environment.

Gravel and Substrate

Gravel is not necessary; in fact very small gravel can be ingested by your turtle and this can cause blockage problems. If you are using gravel, it is important to use larger stones that can't be swallowed and ingested by your turtles.

Alternatively river rocks or aquatic safe rocks can be used. This also makes the clean-up easier. A haul out ramp with a landing/basking spot under the basking lamp is a necessity. There are many commercial basking platforms available, but a flat river rock is also a good option.

Stacked rocks or driftwood in the swim area allows for deep and shallow swimming but also allows the turtle to poke its head out of the water while its body remains submerged.

Heat

The majority of pet turtle species available require heated water, particularly as juveniles. Any heaters need to be covered with a heater guard to prevent shells knocking or cracking the heater.

Water temperature can vary between species, with Red Ear Sliders and Snakenecks requiring cooler temperatures (26-28C) than Reeves or Painted Turtles (27-30C).

Thermometers should be placed at each end of large tanks to ensure an even distribution of temperature.

Light

Turtles require two light sources which are essential for their wellbeing:

Fluorescent reptile light: This needs to be a full spectrum UVA/UVB reptile light which is necessary for the production of calcium and maintenance of the hardness of their shells. It needs to be on for 10 to 12 hours per day or a good rule of thumb is 12 hours on and 12 hours off. This will create a consistent day/night cycle. UV lights require replacing every 6-12 months as per manufacturer guidelines. Without correct UV lighting, turtles are prone to metabolic bone disease and shell rot. It is important to ensure the light is not blocked by plastic, mesh or glass as this will inhibit the vital UV rays. UV bulbs should be approximately 3/4 the length of the tank and span across all basking areas.

Basking light: The basking light mimicks sunlight and provides heat to help dry out their shells when basking. Some of these lights will also emit UV rays. Make sure that your turtle cannot touch this light and it cannot fall into the water. A basking area is needed below it. Basking lights require a distance of at least 20-30cm from your turtle's shell to prevent any burns or close contact. This distance is also dependent on the strength of the bulb and the level of heat that is emitted.

Filtration



Turtles are messy creatures for their size and they need a good filtration system. We recommend a powerful external canister filter as this will help you to create a healthier environment for your turtle to live in. All filters should have three stage filtration and a significant pool of biological media to help the system remain healthy.

Water

Having fresh, clean, non-toxic water is vital for turtles. Not only do they have to swim around in it, but they also use the water to eat, drink, and require it for swallowing. Treat your water with a dechlorinator after each water change, and keep up with regular water testing and tank maintenance to keep this environment safe for your turtle.

Diet

Diet requirements will vary between species. Painted/Reeves turtles are unlikely to eat fresh greens, whereas this is essential for Red Ear Sliders. It is important to encourage your turtle to eat a variety while they are young as they are known for becoming fixed in their diets and can be stubborn about changing.

Safe Food List:

- Protein such as earthworms, crickets, waxworms, silkworms, aquatic snails, blood worms, daphnia, shrimp, krill, and mealworms
- Leafy greens can be fed sparingly such as; collard, mustard and dandelion greens, kale and bok choy. Lettuces need to be of the dark green variety such as water lettuce, romaine, endive or radicchio. Iceberg lettuce contains very little nutrition and should be avoided
- Flowers are okay to feed but make sure they are spray free. Varieties which are safe include roses, pansies, petunias, lilies, carnations, hibiscus, nasturtium and geraniums
- Other vegetables: carrots (tops are fine too), squash and green beans – these can be grated or thinly sliced

Feeding

Juveniles (up to one year) should be fed twice a day and adults (over one year) every second day. They can only feed in water as they need water to swallow and naturally eat while swimming. A secondary large container is often recommended to fill with tank water and remove turtles for feeding to the container, this helps contain feeding mess and minimises waste in the tank.

Feed only as much as can be finished in one feeding session and consider using tongs to hand feed your turtle as this can encourage the trying of new foods.

Keep an eye on your turtle's weight. If there are skin folds around the limbs, this can indicate that they are overweight, while disproportionately thin or small limbs, sunken eyes and 'bony' shell appearance can indicate a turtle is underweight.

Turtle Health and Handling

It's important to wash your hands after handling your turtle, as they can be potential carriers of salmonella. Pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems looking at adopting a turtle should consider if this is the right pet for them, or if there is another responsible adult that can be responsible for the care of the turtle.

The signs of a healthy turtle are:

- Healthy looking hard shell with no lesions, white edging or inconsistencies
- Active and alert
- Feeds well
- Healthy skin with no lesions
- Bright and clear eyes that aren't sunken in
- Clear vent and nose
- Good body condition

The signs of an unhealthy turtle are:

- Open mouth breathing, coughing or sneezing
- Lethargy

- Frantic swimming
- Sores, lesions, discoloured patches or foul smelling patches on the shell
- Swollen or sunken eyes
- Abnormal faeces
- Softened or weakend shell

Consult your veterinarian if you notice any of these signs or symptoms.

Habitat Maintenance

Maintaining good quality is important, particularly as their skin is very sensitive to build ups of ammonia, nitrite or nitrate. Turtle habitats should be regularly water tested similar to fish aquariums, especially to check overall nitrate levels and to increase the volume or frequency of water changes.

Turtles excrete a lot of waste, it is a good idea to do a regular water change of 30-50% once a week with a gravel siphon. Make sure to scrub down the glass as calcification is common in turtle tanks and can be difficult to remove. All docks should be thoroughly scrubbed down to prevent slime build up.

Dechlorinator and a biological supplement should be added after each water change, there are additional waste control products safe for use with turtles that can help break down waste in the habitat.

Filters also need to be maintained and filter wool/sponges to be rinsed out using a bucket of tank water (not fresh water) to prevent killing off any useful bacteria. Filter maintenance should not be completed at the same time as water changes to minimise impact on the biological filter.

Recommended Supplies

- Large tank with wire or mesh lid
- Flat basking rocks
- External filter
- Cuttlefish/conditioning block
- Variety of high quality food including frozen, pelleted, and fresh options
- Gravel siphon
- Heater and heater guard
- Secondary feeding container
- Basking lamp with heat
- UV light bulbs
- Light hood with perspex or glass removed
- Thermometer(s)

- Haul out ramp
- Large gravel or river rocks (optional)

Is a turtle right for you and your family?

- I understand that turtles don't like to be handled
- I can accommodate the large tank, heating and filtration that my turtle will require, including upgrades as my turtle grows
- I can commit to looking after this turtle daily for up to 30 years, including maintenance and any veterinary care required
- I understand the needs for a varied and appropriate diet, and regularly replaced UV lighting
- An adult can provide primary care for this pet
- Taking care of a turtle is a long term commitment which needs a great deal of thought prior to purchasing.

Average size: 16cm to 30cm (adult)

Life span: 20-30 years (species dependent)