

The Importance of Quarantine

By Ryan McVeigh (And Updated by Eric Roscoe)

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed our entire lives over the course of 2020, and terms such as “flatten the curve”, “social distancing”, and other new terminology was very much unknown to us just a year ago. It has also perhaps brought much greater awareness of the idea of quarantine of ourselves and others to the forefront of our minds as well. While reptiles and amphibians themselves currently aren’t known to show or be affected by the symptoms of the novel COVID-19 virus, they can still be susceptible to many other viral, bacterial, or fungal infections which can potentially spread to other animals.

As we are always excited at the prospect of purchasing or acquiring a new animal, there are a few things to remember. First, make sure you have done your research and try not to impulse buy, as you may not have the experience or husbandry requirements for your new pet to thrive. Most importantly, something that often isn’t talked about or thought of as much, be ready to quarantine. This article covers what quarantine is, and what it means, how long you should consider quarantine of your new animals, and how you should go about setting up your quarantine enclosure or setup.

Even with the most respected and careful breeders, animals can sometimes carry diseases or parasites. The owner of the snake may not even know it, as the snake may show no signs. Cryptosporidium in leopard geckos is a great example. This fatal protozoan can be dormant in the animal’s body its entire life and the gecko will show no symptoms whatsoever. Then a time of high stress may cause the organisms to start to thrive as the immune system of the gecko is compromised, and the animal will get thin, begin having diarrhea, stop eating, and eventually die. Because of this, it is very important to quarantine any animals you acquire for a period of time away from any other animals you may keep so these illnesses aren’t transferred to your other healthy reptiles.

There are many practices to quarantining a reptile, so I’ll cover some basic important steps here. First, you want to make sure you have a sterile environment for the animal to live in. Depending on the size of the animal you will want to use a clean, sterile tank or tub set up with the proper heat and humidity. However, for these animals you will want to use paper towel as a substrate for at least the first few weeks. This gives you an opportunity to see mites easily and also to see their feces and urates easily. This is important as it may clue you in to a potential problem with their digestive systems, which is where most parasites or bacteria will live. Make sure to provide the animal with a sterile hide and clean water. Don’t use any sticks, branches, leaves, or any other decorations. You want to make the cage as simple as possible.

The next important thing is to keep this new animal away from any other reptiles you may have, and to clean up between handling or touching this new animal or its enclosure and then you others. There aren’t many illnesses that are airborne, or transferable without contact, but it is still recommended you keep your new animal in a different room. Also, any time you handle your new pet, or touch anything in their enclosure, you want to make sure to clean up afterwards. Keeping a bottle of hand sanitizer near your new pet’s cage is a great idea.

Remember, quarantine is a period of observation of the health of your new pet. Make sure you are keeping the enclosure clean on a daily basis. Remove any feces or dead food items, and replace the paper towel when it is soiled. You also want to make sure to watch them as they do their daily routines. Do they eat? Are they eating well? What is their temperament like? Are they lethargic? Do they seem dazed? Are they exhibiting any odd behaviors? These are all things you’ll want to watch for. Also, make sure to watch their behavior over the time they are in quarantine.

Does it stay the same, or change? All of these things can alert you to possible issues.

Quarantine should last no less than 30 days, but 60-90 is best. Really, it's up to you to gauge the health of the animal and when you are comfortable introducing it to your other animals or keeping it in the same room/tank/rack. If you don't feel comfortable introducing it after 90 days, wait until you are. One may want to consider taking their new animal(s) to see an exotics vet that can give it an exam and do a few tests to let you know if your new pet is healthy. Generally this isn't needed immediately, and ideally should be done at the breeder or facility level, but if you feel the animal may be sick, schedule an appointment.

Quarantining your new pet is important. It gives you a chance to watch it and make sure it is healthy. It also keeps any new addition to your reptile family or collection, from passing on any undesired negative health effects. Although it isn't as fun to keep your new pet in a dull clean tank for a few months, it is definitely worth it.