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IS MY SNAKE OR LIZARD SICK?

Reptiles, like all animals, are susceptible to a variety of bacterial, viral, fungal, metabolic and neoplastic diseases. Unlike domestic animals (dogs, cats, cows, horses and so on) that usually act sick when they are, reptiles are still very much wild animals and hide their illnesses until they are so weakened by the disease that they cannot hide it any longer. As a result, all reptile owners need to be aware of small, subtle changes that may signal illness.

So how can you tell if your lizard or snake is ill? Start by observing and making a mental note of your healthy reptile's normal behavior and habits. Once you know normal, it will be easier to spot abnormal.

Physical Condition and Attitude: A quick overview of the condition of your animal is often the first indicator that a reptile is ill. Changes in activity is often the first sign, with herps losing interest in their cage and surroundings, often becoming more reclusive and spending time in one area of their enclosure. Snakes may not be continuously active, but should show an interest in motion and be willing to "cruise" when picked up and handled. Lizards should be willing to stand off the ground (as appropriate for the species) and walk when stimulated in a regular, even gait. A sick reptile may also act this way when you are present, but not when it is alone: Watch from around the corner or across the room to observe your pet when it doesn't think its being seen. Sitting or standing with its eyes closed or appearing "sleepy" for extended periods of time could be signs of pain, discomfort, or general malaise. It is these changes in behavior and patterns that suggest something is wrong.

Body condition is also an excellent marker of health or chronic disease. Weight loss is the easiest marker, and it can be sudden (acute) or long-term (chronic). Chronic loss is the hardest to notice, as it can occur over months and have few, if any, other symptoms. Look along the spine of any herp- it should be mildly disguised by the muscles on each side. Lizards should have their pelvises just visible and no bones should protrude. In some herps, there is a small crest on their skull masked by the jaw muscles and it should only be able to be felt by firm palpation, not visible. If any of these skeletal signs are present, there may be slow-onset medical concerns. However, if there is apparent weight loss over a short period of time, such as a week or two, this is a definite sign that something is wrong- acute weight loss is a symptom of catabolism, often triggered by severe, aggressive disease, and your pet should be seen soon.

Droppings: A normal herp dropping has three components. The dark, solid portion is feces. The white and the water parts are urates. The volume of the solid portion may change, depending on

what it has eaten. However, the color and firmness should remain the same. Most species of reptiles should have a “tubular shaped” stool, with a firm, but not dry, consistency. A lack of solid consistency to the feces is true diarrhea, and is cause for concern; watch for color, shape and texture. One or two abnormal droppings are usually nothing to worry about, but consistently abnormal droppings over an entire week would warrant a call to the vet. Blood in the droppings is always abnormal. Insectivores and herbivores should not have gas in their stool, and they should not have a particularly foul smell. Strong odor is normal for carnivorous reptiles. Passing of undigested or partially digested food material is a consistent sign of significant disease and should be addressed immediately.

The white portion should always be white/cream colored. Changes in urate color may indicate disease or poisoning, and they may change color from white or cream to yellow, green or red/orange. The amount of clear urine may increase with high fluid intake or as a result of disease. Kidney disease generally decreased solid urate (white portion) production and can increase or decrease water intake.

Appetite: Anorexia in a reptile is a symptom of a disease, not a disease itself. Missing a meal or two can be a sign of a shed, heat/cold stress or environmental changes that the herp did not readily adapt to. Missing more than two meals is a sign that something is wrong with the reptile, and unfortunately, continually missing meals often accelerates the progress of disease. Most reptiles have inducible digestion processes, meaning that when they miss a couple meals, they lose the ability to produce the digestive enzymes and acids that are necessary to absorb food. Therefore, forced feeding is often counter-productive, as GI disease often produces anorexia, and placing food in the GI tract before the disease is treated most often worsens the GI disease.

Furthermore, anorexia in well-fed to obese animals can create a fatal liver failure, whether due to environment, disease, or stress. If there are concerns about dietary intake in your reptile, a discussion with a herp-experienced and trained veterinarian is an excellent first step.

In short, it can be elusive to identify the early signs of disease in your reptile. However, it is essential to note changes in their behavior, attitude and physical condition as early as possible to prevent serious disease from becoming life-threatening.