



Introduction to Axolotl Care

Melissa Magnuson DVM

Axolotls (also known as "Mexican Walking Fish") are fully aquatic amphibians native to Lake Xochimilco and Lake Chalco in Mexico, where the water temperature rarely rises about 68 degrees. They are known for their ability to regenerate limbs and organs but can develop health issues with improper care.

Habitat

Axolotls can grow up to 9-10 inches and have an average lifespan of 10 years. The minimum tank size for one adult axolotl is a 29-gallon aquarium (30in X 12in X 18in), but the more space you can provide, the better it will be for your axolotl. Keep in mind that floor space will be utilized more than height, therefore a low, wide tank is recommended over a narrow, tall tank. The water level should always be a couple of inches below the lip of the tank to prevent your axolotl from escaping. We recommend starting off with an adult tank, as juveniles grow quickly.

Provide smooth caves and hiding spaces for your axolotl. Keep in mind that rough surfaces can injure them. We recommend keeping the aquarium bare-bottomed, with the exception of hides, moss balls, and large smooth rocks and/or décor; this is important for juveniles, as Axolotls will ingest anything that can fit in their mouths, often by accident while feeding.

Water Maintenance

Axolotls can produce high levels of ammonia and it is incredibly important to cycle your aquarium with beneficial bacteria before adding your axolotl. This process typically takes a minimum of four weeks when done properly. This may seem like a long time to wait but having an established source of good bacteria prior to introducing your axolotl will ensure that the naturally produced ammonia will be able to be broken



down properly into less harmful nitrate, which will decrease with regular water changes and proper filtration (a filter with an adjustable flow rate and customizable filter filler options are ideal). The nitrate level should stay between 5ppm-20ppm at all times. This value will never be zero in a truly established aquarium. You can also utilize live, low-light plants such as moss balls and pothos to aid in the management of nitrates.

It is important to always use a water conditioner for your axolotl. Be sure that this conditioner does not contain iodine or aloe, as these can be toxic. Seachem Prime is a safe water conditioner that we recommend.

It is important to monitor the water quality in your axolotl aquarium. We recommend test kits such as the API Freshwater Aquarium Master Kit. This kit is user-friendly and accurate to test your water parameters to ensure that your ammonia, nitrite, and nitrate levels are not spiking.

Temperature & Lighting

Axolotls are fully aquatic salamanders that are native to lakes that very rarely exceed 68 degrees F. Because of this natural temperature, they do not require a water heater. Some people utilize fans or chillers to keep temperatures at the desired level of 60-68 degrees F. Water temperatures exceeding 70 degrees F can cause health issues. It is important to use a thermometer in your aquarium to monitor the consistency of the temperature.

Axolotls are very sensitive to light and aquarium lighting is not recommended. Keep this in mind when adding any plants to the aquarium.

Diet

An axolotl should eat a varied diet consisting of nightcrawlers, earthworms, ghost shrimp, and cherry shrimp. Daphnia and black worms can also be fed to younger axolotls but are typically too small for adults. You can supplement their diet with axolotl pellets and products such as Repashy Grub Pie or frozen blood worms as a treat.

We do not recommend feeding live feeder fish, such as goldfish or minnows. These "feeders" can nip at your axolotl, damaging its slime coat and/or gills.

Basic Health

Observe your axolotl's appearance and behavior closely to learn what is normal for them. Axolotls will "fire up" and "fire down" and you may notice a change in their coloration (such as gills becoming brighter when they are more active). This is normal and should not cause

concern. Unusual behavior or changes in normal habits can be a sign of disease. Watch for gills that seem to be “disintegrating”, curled gills, loss of appetite, erratic swimming, scratching at their gills, frequent floating, or curling of the tail.

Please call and schedule an appointment if you have any concerns about your axolotl.