



Introduction to Leopard Gecko Care

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Native to the deserts of Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Iran, Leopard geckos are a popular lizard species kept as pets in the US. Their friendly demeanor and easy care make them a good beginner's reptile, while their small size and prolific reproduction style make them enjoyable to the advanced hobbyist as well.

Housing

A proper enclosure will ensure your leopard gecko's safety. The larger the cage, the better! The small plastic enclosures sold in most pet stores are too small to serve as living quarters; they should be considered traveling enclosures only. Leopard geckos are social pets and generally enjoy being handled. Too much or improper handling, however, can cause stress and lead to illness. Incompatible tank mates can also cause stress, so be sure to only house similarly sized leopard geckos together and do not mix gecko species.

Glass aquariums with secure screen tops make the best enclosures for leopard geckos. Choose an aquarium that is at least 20 gallons in capacity. Larger aquariums are even better. Provide non-toxic plants and caves for your gecko to hide under, as well as sloped branches for him to climb. In the wild, leopard geckos are considered terrestrial, or ground-dwelling lizards.

Provide as natural of an environment as possible to promote the health and longevity of your gecko. Logs, rocks, plants, and branches provide spaces to exercise and hide. It can be very stressful for a leopard gecko to have no place to hide. Rearrange the props in your pet's enclosure often to help prevent him from becoming bored.



The most popular substrate/bedding for leopard geckos is calcium-based sand, which provides soft ground for your gecko to burrow in and makes for easy removal of waste products. With any type of granular bedding, impaction from ingestion is a risk, and it may require surgical treatment. If you are using sand in your habitat, feed your gecko in a separate environment. Reptile-specific carpeting is the best option as it carries no risk of impaction. We do not recommend corncob, wood shavings, rock sand, newspaper, or gravel.

Although your leopard gecko is a desert-dwelling lizard, it can be beneficial for him to have a moist area to retreat to when he is ready to shed. Moistened paper towels or sphagnum moss added to one of his hiding spots will help ease the stress of shedding. Remember to change this substrate daily to prevent fungus or bacteria from forming.

Clean your gecko's enclosure regularly. Remove uneaten food daily. The enclosure and all of the items inside it should be cleaned and disinfected at least every other week. The enclosure can be cleaned with a mild soap solution, and then disinfected with a solution of 1 capful bleach to 1 gallon of water. Pet stores also carry cleaning solutions designed for reptiles. Make sure to rinse the habitat well and dry it thoroughly before returning the leopard gecko.

Heat & Lighting

Appropriate heating is essential for the survival of your leopard gecko. Give your gecko warm and cool areas in his enclosure for the proper regulation of body temperature. Leopard geckos require a temperature gradient where the warm side of the tank is approximately 80 to 85 degrees F, and the cool side is 70 to 75 degrees F at all times. The use of heat rocks is strongly discouraged as they can malfunction and cause severe contact burns. Place a heat light (over the tank) and a heating pad (under the tank) on one side of the enclosure to create a temperature gradient.

UVA/UVB light is not required for leopard geckos but is strongly recommended. The lighting should be on during normal daylight hours all year long. Leopard geckos that do not get the amount of UV light they need lose bone density, which can lead to bone disease. Because UV bulbs will stop emitting UV light before the bulb itself burns out, we recommend that you date and change the bulb at least every 6 months. Please note that fluorescent UV lights do not produce heat and must be used in addition to the heat source.

Natural sunlight, when available, is also beneficial. Windows and aquariums filter out much of the UV sunlight, so placing the cage or aquarium with a screen top by an opened window for a portion of the day is one option during warm weather. Your gecko should always have a shaded area to use if he chooses.

Diet

Leopard geckos should be raised on a variety of live insects such as crickets, mealworms, and wax worms. Offer juvenile leopard geckos a constant supply of worms, as well as live crickets twice daily. Offer adult leopard geckos crickets and worms 3-4 times per week. The crickets should be no larger than the distance between your pet's eyes. Sprinkle them with a leopard gecko-specific vitamin powder before feeding. Remove any uneaten crickets within 10-15 minutes. It is ok to leave live mealworms or wax worms in the enclosure for up to 24 hours.

The best way to be sure your juvenile leopard gecko is getting enough nutrients is to weigh and/or measure him every week. There should be a measurable gain in weight and body length over time. Look for approximately a 1" increase in length every month for the first 8 months. A leopard gecko that is not growing this quickly is either sick or not getting enough nutrients.

Water should be available to your leopard gecko at all times. A low-sided bowl or container that is easily accessible is best. The container should be washed and fresh un-chlorinated water should be given on a daily basis.

Salmonella

Any reptile may be carrying salmonella, even when they are perfectly healthy. Many reptiles are persistently infected. This means that they harbor the bacteria in their body at all times, and shed the bacteria into the environment when stressed. The most common sources of stress are inappropriate habitats and poor diet.

It is safest to assume that your reptile is always shedding salmonella. Always wash your hands after handling. It is especially important to supervise small children. Children and immunocompromised individuals are at most risk for serious illness from Salmonella infection.

Other Illness

Knowing what is normal for your leopard gecko is very important. Become familiar with your leopard gecko's normal appetite, activity level, amount and frequency of urination/defecation, the appearance of waste products, and the general appearance of your reptile. A change in one of these normal behaviors may be a sign of disease. If you notice a change in your leopard gecko, observe him closely. If the signs or symptoms persist for 1-2 days, or you notice new signs/symptoms, please call us for an appointment. The sooner we are able to address a problem, the more successful we will be in treating it.

Signs of a medical emergency may include bloating, bloody waste products, heavy breathing or panting, seizures, and lameness. Call us immediately if you notice these symptoms.

Preventive Care

We recommend a yearly physical examination for your leopard gecko to be sure he is healthy. The signs of poor health in leopard geckos can be subtle and if they are not recognized early, it can be too late to treat. It is possible for leopard geckos to harbor internal parasites for a long period of time before displaying any symptoms. Because of this, we recommend a yearly fecal test (a test run from a stool sample).