Habitats: Cleaning and Disinfecting Reptile Cages

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Reptiles require special care to maintain cleanliness. Routine cage maintenance is necessary to keep it a safe and healthy home for your herp, and an enjoyable, odor-free, and attractive showplace for your enjoyment as well.

Because reptiles are susceptible to skin and bacterial infections, cages and housing must be kept scrupulously clean. And because their fecal matter may carry bacteria, like *Salmonella*, that can cause disease in humans, your reptile's cage, furnishings, and the cleaning equipment itself need to be regularly cleaned and periodically disinfected.

Start with clean cage accessories

Make sure any natural items, such as rocks and branches, that you introduce into the environment are sterile. Rocks should be cleaned, then boiled in water for 30 minutes. Sand can be rinsed with large amounts of water to remove any particulate debris, then heated in the oven at 200-250°F for 30 minutes. Branches should also be cleaned, then heated in the oven at 200-250°F for 30 minutes.

Cleaning tools

Assemble a cleaning kit expressly for cleaning the cage. Store these items separately from your other household cleaning supplies. To prevent cross-contamination, never use sinks or tubs that are used for human bathing or food preparation.

- Back-up cage - a clean environment for the minutes, hours, or even days your herp must be relocated.
- Brushes - small and medium sizes depending on your cage. A toothbrush is good for corners and crevices in decorations.
- Buckets
- Herp-safe terrarium cleaner - dissolves matter hardened on surfaces.
- Paper towels
- Q-tips, toothpicks, putty knives, and razor blades - needed to reach into the smallest of spaces, and remove hardened material.
- Rubber gloves and goggles
- Sand-sifter - removes feces and other debris from sand and other fine-particulate substrates.
- Soap or dishwashing detergent - do not use any products that contain phenol or pine scent.
- Sponges - 1 set for cleaning, one for rinsing, and one for disinfecting.

Cleaning schedule

The timing and amount of routine cage cleaning depends on the size and habits of your herp. Begin by reading everything available regarding its species-specific needs and preferences. Cages of large iguanas, for example, require more work than those of a snake. Of course, you will also learn from close personal observation. In general, you will need to perform:

- A daily cleaning to remove spills, uneaten food, shed skin, urates, or feces; also clean and disinfect food and water dishes.
- A weekly cleaning and disinfecting the cage, substrate, and decorations.

During cleaning procedures, it is recommended to use rubber or latex gloves and protective goggles. After every contact with your herp, and every cleaning procedure - no matter how large or small - wash your hands thoroughly; you may also wish to use a hand sanitizer.

Daily cleaning

As you clean, it is important to look for any signs that your herp may be ill. Also, watch for hazardous conditions in the cage, and remove or correct them. Observe:

- Has the normal amount of food been eaten?
- Is the temperature of the cage within the proper limits?
- Are the feces and urates normal in appearance and quantity?

Disinfectants

- Selecting the proper disinfectant for cages

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- Has there been any shedding? Does it appear normal?
- Is there any evidence of parasites?
    - Mites appear as small brown, red, or black spots around your reptile's eyes, between its scales, or moving over the animal's skin.
    - Ticks are slightly larger, appearing brown, black, or gray in color.
    - Internal parasitic infestations are most often signaled by emaciation or changes in the feces.
- Do any of the accessories appear frayed or need to be replaced?
- Is the cage in good repair?

Daily, remove feces and uneaten food, and wipe up water spills and urates. If you are using a sand substrate, you can use a Sand Sifter to clean and extend its life.

If you deem it necessary to clean the inside the cage with a cleaning solution, relocate your herp to another clean cage until the cage is dry and free of fumes.

Food and water dishes should be washed in hot, soapy water, and dried thoroughly. To provide more cleaning power, use a disinfectant. Always rinse well to be sure no trace of soap or disinfectant remains on the dishes. A good alternative is to have two or more sets of dishes, so while one set is being cleaned, the other set can be used in the cage.

Routine weekly cleaning

Once a week, or as often as needed, relocate your herp to a clean cage, then…

- Remove all decorations in the cage.
- Clean, rinse, and disinfect water bowls and food bowls, as above.
- Bag and discard disposable substrate.
- Clean all cage surfaces with soap and hot water, and rinse well.
- Loosen tough spots with a commercial herp-safe terrarium cleaner, a toothbrush, or putty knife.
- Wash all decorations and nondisposable substrate, such as indoor/outdoor carpet, with hot, soapy water. Scrub with brushes to remove wastes and dried liquids. Rinse well.
- After washing and rinsing the cage and accessories, use a disinfectant. Be sure to rinse the cage and accessories with hot water until all residues are removed.
- Allow the cage and accessories to dry thoroughly before reassembling to reduce the possibility of mold.
- Re-install decorations. Replace any decoration, especially wood, which will not easily dry.
- Be sure to thoroughly clean and disinfect all equipment, sponges, buckets, gloves, and sinks.
- Lastly, wash your hands with hot, soapy water.

Acclimation

If bathing is recommended for your herp, it is a good idea to bathe your herp before introducing it into its newly cleaned, dry, odor-free cage.

must be done carefully. The disinfectant must be strong enough to kill disease-causing viruses, bacteria, and fungi, yet not cause harm to the herp. Reptiles are sensitive to toxic fumes, so care must be taken to move them to another room while using most disinfectants.

- Although there are many disinfectants on the market, the most readily available disinfectant for cleaning a cage is household bleach. Use bleach at a dilution of approximately 1 part bleach to 32 parts water (1/2 cup bleach to 1 gallon of water). Other disinfectants safe for herps may be available from your veterinarian.

- It is important to remove food, feces, soaps, etc., before using any disinfectant since the presence of organic material will prevent it from working properly. So clean any soiled areas of the cage or its accessories with a hot solution of dishwashing

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liquid, rinse well, then apply the disinfectant.

- Apply the disinfectant liberally to the cage and accessories. Allow the disinfectant to have contact with the material for 10 minutes; if an item is porous, a longer time may be needed. Rinse the items, especially any wooden items, thoroughly with clean water to remove all the disinfectant. For your safety and comfort, use the bleach solution in an area that is adequately ventilated. Rubber gloves and safety goggles are also recommended. Allow the cage and all items to dry thoroughly before reassembling and placing the herp back into the cage.

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