

# Overfeeding Reptiles: Prevent Obesity-related Health Problems

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

Snakes and lizards are often described as long and thin; and whoever thought of an overweight turtle? But as with other pets, reptiles, amphibians, and chelonians (turtles) in captivity can develop weight-related health problems. Overfeeding can occur quite easily for several reasons:



Less energy expended

Herps are cold-blooded: All of these species are cold-blooded, meaning they maintain their body temperature by absorbing environmental heat, not by making their own. This means they have less energy requirements when compared with warm-blooded animals. As a result, pound for pound, they do not require as much food as other pets, such as dogs, cats, and birds. It is estimated that reptiles need only 10% of the food needed by an equally sized warm-blooded animal.

Lack of exercise: In the wild, many herps, such as pythons, boas, monitor lizards, and alligators are naturally sedentary, more or less waiting for their prey to cross their paths. In captivity, they maintain that sedentary life style. Other species of wild herps, such as garter snakes and anoles may use considerable energy in foraging for food, however in a home environment, the food is brought to them, and little energy is expended.

Unused fat reserves: Some herps will store fat to use in times of reproduction or hibernation. If captive herps do not reproduce or are not allowed to hibernate, these fat stores can accumulate.

Improper diet

Improper quantities: Because most of us would not consider going weeks without food, many owners find it difficult to believe their herps can, and will feed them more often than necessary. Juvenile herps usually require more frequent feedings, but once they reach adulthood, the number of feedings can be reduced to help keep the animal at his optimal weight. The use of some manufactured diets can make overfeeding even easier.

Improper food: Diets fed to captive herps may be higher in calories than those they would have in the wild. Many of the wild herbivorous (plant-eating) herps must eat large amounts of low-calorie roughage to meet their needs. If they are fed more calorie dense, low-fiber foods in captivity, digestive problems and weight problems can often result. Carnivorous (meat-eating) herps fed large numbers of mice versus a more varied diet are also more susceptible to weight problems.

Conclusion

Overfeeding herps can be relatively easy to do and, in amphibians, is considered the second most common nutritional health problem. It can lead to breeding problems, decreased organ function, and shorter life spans. Avoid overfeeding by understanding the different anatomy and physiology of herps, and feeding the proper diet. Consult with your veterinarian to determine if your herp is overweight, and what dietary modifications should be made.