

Caring for Leopard Geckos

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- Consult a veterinarian with experience in treating reptiles if you have any questions or concerns about your gecko's health.

One of the most common pet lizards, the leopard gecko is hardy and friendly. It can vocalize, lick its eyes, and “wink” its ears. Leopard geckos have various colors and patterns, and their price varies according to their appearance. Housing and feeding a leopard gecko is relatively simple, but some guidelines must be followed to keep these geckos healthy.

Biological Facts

- Average life span: 8 to 10 years of age; more than 20 years of age has been reported
- Natural habitat: desert
- Size: hatchlings are 3 to 4 inches in length, adult females are 7 to 8 inches, and males are 8 to 10 inches
- Fat is stored in the tail for periods when food is less available.

Behavior

- Leopard geckos are nocturnal (active at night).
- They live alone or in pairs.
- They are generally calm and tolerate some handling.
- If frightened, they can release their tail as a defense mechanism. The tail usually regenerates within months.
- They normally eat their shed skin.

Diet

Leopard geckos usually eat insects such as crickets, mealworms, superworms, Phoenix Worms, flies, and roaches. They occasionally eat pinkie mice. It is recommended to feed small, frequent meals (three or four insects per day) rather than larger, less frequent meals. The insects should be fed a nutritious diet for

at least 12 hours before they are fed to geckos. Powdered diets for insects are available at most pet stores. The insects should be dusted with a calcium supplement three or four times per week. The calcium powder may also be offered to the gecko in a shallow dish. A shallow water dish should be provided for drinking and soaking.

Environment

A 10- to 20-gallon aquarium or other enclosure is usually sufficient for one or two geckos. The environment requires appropriate humidity to allow proper shedding by the gecko. The enclosure should

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be misted daily, or a humidifier or reptile misting system should be provided. Because these geckos are shy and nocturnal, they require a hide box from which they can be easily removed, if necessary. The interior of the hide box should be kept moist with moistened peat moss, vermiculite (a water-absorbent mineral), or paper towels. Only one end of the enclosure should be heated to provide a necessary temperature variation. The temperature should be 85°F to 90°F (29.4°C to 32.2°C) on the warm side and 78°F to 80°F (25.6°C to 26.7°C) on the cool side. The temperature can be allowed to drop to 78°F (25.6°C) at night. The best heat source is either a heat lamp or ceramic heat emitter placed above the enclosure. Under-tank heaters and hot rocks are not as safe or effective. Ultraviolet B (UVB) lighting at 5.0% or greater is recommended for 12 hours per day. The enclosure should be dark at night. Although leopard geckos are nocturnal, direct and indirect exposure to UVB radiation benefits their overall health. A nonparticle material (e.g., newspaper, paper

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towels, reptile carpet) is recommended for the bottom of the enclosure. Sand and walnut shells can irritate the eyes and cause impaction if ingested.

Preventive Care

- Leopard geckos should have a routine physical examination every 6 to 12 months. Consult a veterinarian with experience in treating reptiles if you have any questions or concerns about your gecko's health.
- Leopard geckos should have an annual fecal examination for parasites.
- Your veterinarian may recommend blood tests.

Common Medical Disorders

- Retained shed cells can lead to loss of toenails, digits, or tail tips.
- Retained shed cells or foreign material in the eyes can lead to infection and vision loss.
- Abscesses
- Hemipenal casts (a reproductive organ problem in males)
- Egg binding (inability to pass an egg, causing pain and straining)
- Calcium deficiency (metabolic bone disease)
- Internal parasites