

Iguana Care Sheet

Recommended References:

Melissa Kaplan's Green Iguana Pages: <http://www.anapsid.org/Iguana/>.

Green Iguana Society: <http://www.greenigsociety.org/careinfo.htm>.

Iguanas for Dummies is a wonderful book that is a necessity for anyone who owns an Iguana. Written by Melissa Kaplan, this book is useful from cover to cover. It contains everything you need to know about Iguanas.

Green Iguana – The Ultimate Owner's Manual by James W. Hatfield III. is another comprehensive book on Iguana husbandry. It contains a lot of detailed information and is a highly recommended reference.

Caring for your Iguana:

You must be prepared for emergencies, such as equipment failure and power outages, as well as the effects of stress and illness of your Iguana. You will also need an experienced Iguana-sitter while you are away from home. Having access to an experienced reptile Veterinarian in your area is extremely important for regular health check-ups, as well as in case of emergencies. Please contact us if you require a list of experienced reptile Veterinarians in your area.

Preparation for Veterinary Bills: (fees based on 2006) nail trimming ~\$20, exotic animal exam fee ~\$75, female Iguana spay ~\$600; remember that bloodwork, x-rays, medication and hospital stays all add to your bill.

The Enclosure:

A properly cared for adult Iguana will be LARGE - up to 6 feet long! Their growth is not limited by the size of their enclosure. They will continue to grow throughout their life span - quickly for the first 3 years, and more slowly as they age. A young Iguana will outgrow a 55 gallon aquarium within a year or so. An Iguana enclosure should be at least twice the length of the Iguana and should be tall since they love to climb and feel most comfortable up high. The width of the cage should be at least half your Iguana's length. The bigger the cage, the more comfortable your Iguana will be. For details and tips on building an enclosure please refer to the references at the top of this document. The safest and most sanitary substrate for the enclosure is paper. Newspaper is also ok to use. Packing paper works well and can be purchased in large rolls. Be sure to provide safe perches and things to climb on. Any branches for climbing should be at least the width of the Iguana's abdomen. The UV lighting and heat lamp should be placed on top of the enclosure where the Iguana cannot touch them.

*If you are planning to let your Iguana roam free in your home, make sure it is Iguana-proof. I recommend using one room for smaller Iguanas – they can squeeze into almost any small space where they cannot be reached, climb onto curtains, houseplants, and furniture, and get into things that are potentially dangerous. There have also been many cases of Iguanas eating small items off the floor causing bowel obstruction, impaction, and even death. It is vital to ensure that your Iguana remains in an area that is safe and within the proper temperature range.

Heating:

Being ectothermic, a captive reptile cannot maintain its body temperature within the required range on its own - it has to rely on you to provide an environment that allows it to stay healthy. If proper temperatures in the habitat are not reached, the Iguana will not be able to fully digest the food it eats. Temperatures of at least 85° F are required for an Iguana to properly digest its food. Daytime habitat temperatures can go up to 95° F and you should provide cooler temperatures at night, but the temperature should not fall lower than 75-78° F. A temperature gradient should be provided to allow the Iguana to move from place to place as needed. Ordinary 60 watt incandescent light bulbs can provide adequate heat and light. You do not need to buy expensive "basking bulbs" from the pet store. The wattage of the bulb can be changed depending on the size of the enclosure and the temperature of the room. It is imperative that you use reliable thermometers at various locations inside the enclosure to check for an accurate temperature - *do not guess!* Remember that you will need to pay the additional monthly electric or gas bills involved in running extra heating/lighting.

Hot rocks are not recommended for Iguanas! Hot rocks are inadequate in providing proper heat regulation and can be dangerous. Too often Iguanas obtain serious burns from hot rocks. Heat and light should come from above the enclosure, as wild Iguanas bask in the sunlight in their natural habitat. Heating pads can also be used along with lights, as long as you can regulate the temperature to a safe level and monitor it on a regular basis. Remember, if it is too hot for your hand it is too hot for the Iguana!

Lighting:

Iguanas **must** have a source of UVA and UVB light! They need to be replaced every 6 months to be effective.

UVA promotes natural behaviors by acting like natural sunlight.

UVB is important to Iguanas for a different reason. Without it, their bodies cannot manufacture vitamin D3 or properly use Calcium. Iguanas that are deprived of proper UV lighting suffer from a disease called [Metabolic Bone Disease \(MBD\)](#) which is unfortunately very common in captive Iguanas. MBD causes weak bones, jaw and bone deformities and early death.

By hooking up a timer to your full-spectrum UV light and heat lamp you will allow for a much needed regular light schedule. A light cycle of 12 hour nights and 12 hour days is ideal. This is also very convenient if you are going to be away for an overnight stay.

Humidity:

Iguanas require high humidity in their environments. Daily misting of the environment from a clean water bottle is needed. Humidity levels in your Iguana's environment should be 65-75%. One of the most common problems seen in Iguanas is dehydration. On their own, Iguanas don't drink very much (in the wild the rainforests control their hydration levels). Our environments tend to be much drier so many Iguanas spend much of their time at least mildly dehydrated. Long term dehydration harms the kidneys, and can contribute to kidney failure at a young age. High humidity also helps loosen shedding skin, which makes the shedding process easier and helps prevent retained skin. On the other hand, too much humidity can also lead to problems. Fungus, bacteria, and blister disease can result. You can purchase inexpensive humidity gauges for your Iguanas' environment.

Bathing:

Most Iguana owners give their Iguana a bath in either their bathtub or in another large tub set aside especially for the Iguana. When using a bathtub that is used by people, it is important to thoroughly clean and disinfect the tub after use. Make sure the water is not too deep. A good height should be about the height of the Iguanas head when lying down. The temperature should be warm, but *not* hot. Soap is not required and should *not* be used. After a half hour or so the temperature of the water will begin to cool, so the water will need to be either replaced or warmed up. When Iguanas eliminate, the feces and urates are expelled at the same time. It is not uncommon for Iguanas to eliminate in water. For this reason, the bathtub is a fairly easy way to toilet train an Iguana. A bath can be given every day but the minimum should be once a week.

Cleaning:

The enclosure should be cleaned with soap and water and then disinfected with a Javex solution at least once a week, or whenever dirty. The proper concentration for the Javex solution is 1 part Javex to 10 parts water for a minimum contact time of 10 minutes. Rinse everything well after disinfecting because fumes and any remaining solution can be extremely dangerous and even deadly to your Iguana.

Handling:

If your Iguana is young (under 2 years old) or is in need of socialization please refer to the references mentioned at the top of this document. There are great tips on proper handling to prevent harm to you or your pet, and ways to encourage your Iguana to adapt better to their new surroundings.

Nail trimming: Iguanas require regular claw trimmings, usually at least once per month. If you do not feel comfortable doing this yourself, you can pay a visit to your local Veterinary clinic. An Iguana owner can usually be spotted by the large number of scratches on their arms. An Iguana's claws can be very dangerous, especially a large Iguana. A sharp claw also has an increased chance of getting caught on something, which can lead to several different injuries including claws being pulled out, broken toes and possibly even broken legs. Sharp, untrimmed claws can also cause damage to household objects.

Health Risks:

Iguanas can carry *Salmonella* bacteria in their intestines. These bacteria can be shed with bowel movements and can be picked up by humans. A disease that can spread from animals to humans is called a zoonosis. There are also other bacteria and parasites which could be transmitted from your Iguana to you. The key to preventing these problems is proper hygiene for you and your pets. Wash your hands after handling your Iguana or anything your Iguana has come into contact with. Keep your Iguana and its habitat clean. Keep your other pets away from your Iguana and do not kiss your Iguana. Children should be supervised when handling an Iguana due to possible health risks (not to mention the Iguana's strength). If you are careful and use common sense, you can easily avoid potential problems.

Stress and Illness:

Iguanas cannot complain verbally when something hurts. It is up to us to use our knowledge of their normal behaviors and routines to decide when something is wrong. Here are some things to look for:

- lameness, or lack of movement
- lack of usual activity or slowed reflexes
- anorexic
- restless
- depressed or lethargic
- unusual aggression or avoidance behavior

Sometimes a healthy Iguana will act differently, but these changes are normal:

Normal breeding season changes:

- an orange color
- increased activity level and change in daily routines
- decreased appetite
- decreased feces and urates
- appearance of seminal deposits or plugs in males
- aggression in males

A note on spaying: Females are very difficult to deal with during their breeding season, and they produce eggs every year whether they mate or not (like chickens). If they decide to lay eggs and do not have a proper nesting box, it can be deadly for the Iguana. Their breeding season is normally late winter/early spring. If you have a female Iguana please learn more about their breeding habits and consider having her spayed. I know from experience that it is worth every penny.

Normal changes associated with skin shedding:

- grey or white in color
- activity level decreases and daily routines change
- reduced appetite

Sneezing: Iguanas sneeze excess salt from their nostrils on a regular basis – this is normal.

Food and Feeding:

Iguanas are strict herbivores (plant eaters). Under no circumstances should they be given animal protein of any kind.

Size of food: Iguanas have many small teeth - they rip and tear their food instead of chewing it. Usually, they will take large bites and swallow their food whole. It is important to cut food into very small pieces for this reason. A food processor is a great investment.

Portions of food: An Iguana cannot be overfed – feeding once daily in the morning is the best. If the Iguana has eaten and appears to be done for that sitting, it is a good idea to remove any uneaten food as soon as possible. This will assure that the Iguana will not eat any spoiled or rotten food and it will maintain a clean area for living. This will also help keep a regular feeding schedule.

Feeding time: It is a good idea to feed an Iguana early in the morning just after they wake up. Providing food in the morning allows for proper digestion during the day. This can be important in order to establish good litter box or toilet training.

The following chart is a great summary for what to use when preparing meals for your Iguana. Don't feed just one type of green or vegetable, offer a variety.

Category of good food types	Food
Greens (40-45%)	Collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, dandelion greens, escarole, watercress.
Other vegetables (40-45%)	Green beans, orange-fleshed squashes (butternut, Kabocha), snap or snow peas, parsnip, asparagus, okra, mature alfalfa (<i>not</i> sprouts), sweet potato, yellow squash.
Fruits (10% or less)	Figs (raw or dried), blackberries, strawberries, raspberries, grapes, mango, melon (cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon), papaya, banana, apple.

Oxalates and phytates: Many foods contain oxalates and phytates which can bind to Calcium. This prevents the Calcium from being properly used by the body. They include the following and should *only* be fed occasionally: Spinach, beets, beet greens, swiss chard, dock, sorrel, whole grains, celery stalk, kale, carrots and carrot tops.

Goitrogens: Goitrogens are substances that prevent iodine from effectively working which can lead to hypothyroidism. The foods that usually contain goitrogens are members of the cruciferous family of vegetables. These foods can be fed *on occasion only*: kale, broccoli, cabbage, bok-choy, turnips, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, rutabaga, plain tofu.

Commercial frozen vegetables: Frozen vegetables can be thawed and fed *on occasion* or in case of emergency (if you run out of fresh food). Freezing vegetables causes the thiamine (vitamin B1) to leak out causing illness in Iguanas.

Some foods need to be avoided altogether: Any animal protein (meat, eggs, cheese, dairy) – Iguanas are vegetarians; rhubarb – this is poisonous and should never be fed to Iguanas; lettuce (iceberg, romaine, Boston, butter) - very low in nutritional value; wild plants and flowers - contamination with herbicides/pesticides? It could be a toxic plant.

Calcium and vitamin supplements: If you are providing your Iguana with an optimal diet, the best way to provide Calcium to a healthy Iguana is by using pure Calcium Carbonate. It can be found in tablet or powder form in most pharmacies. Supplements should always be added just before serving the food. Juvenile Iguanas grow faster, so they require more frequent supplementation. Juveniles should get a small pinch or a light dusting approximately every other feeding and adults once or twice a week. Gravid females also need extra Calcium for egg production. The pinch should be small, as over-supplementation can also cause severe problems. There are *many* different brands of vitamin supplements available, but many contain added phosphorus and D₃. An excess of

phosphorous and vitamin D₃ can lead to serious health problems. If you are feeding your Iguana a healthy diet as described above, then added vitamins are likely not necessary and a Calcium supplement by itself is enough.

Please do not hesitate to contact us at *any* time should you have any questions or concerns about your Iguana.