FAQs: Tortoises

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

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- What kind of lighting does my tortoise need?
- Why does my tortoise need UV light?
- Do tortoises need to hibernate?

Is there a difference between a tortoise and turtle?

Both turtles and tortoises are Chelonians, or members of the order Chelonia. "Turtle" and "tortoise" are common names, and, in the United States, a tortoise is a Chelonian that lives primarily on land, while turtles are Chelonians that are primarily aquatic or semi-aquatic. There are differences in diet as well.

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How long do tortoises live?

Tortoises usually live anywhere from 50 to 100 years and sometimes even longer, so they are a lifelong commitment.

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How big do tortoises get?

They vary widely in size depending on the species. For example, Hinge-back Tortoises weigh in at only about 2 lbs, while African Spurred Tortoises can weigh upwards of 100 lbs. All tortoises grow slowly, but they will grow continuously when they are actively feeding.

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Which tortoises are kept as pets?

Some tortoises kept as pets include Red-footed Tortoises, Greek Tortoises, Leopard Tortoises, Russian Tortoises, African Spurred Tortoises, and two species of Hinge-backed Tortoises.

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What do tortoises eat?

Tortoises are almost exclusively herbivorous, which means they need a diet that consists of 100% plant material. They also need to be given a calcium and vitamin supplement regularly. A sample diet would contain about 90% leafy green vegetables and no more than 10% fruits and other vegetables. Appropriate leafy greens include coarse mixed grasses and hays, dandelion greens, collard greens, clover, endive, flower heads, and carrot toppings. Fruits and vegetables you can feed include cantaloupe, peas, parsnip, grapes, sweet potatoes, green beans, and red and green sweet peppers.

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Can't I just feed my tortoise commercial pellets?

Though you can use a tortoise commercial diet as part of the daily diet, there is no one tortoise diet that works for all species, and tortoises vary widely in both their tastes and needs. Additionally, many commercial pellets will contain too much protein, so be sure to read the label carefully.

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Do tortoises need water?

Yes, you should provide a large, shallow, sturdy dish that your tortoise cannot tip over. He will drink from this, bathe or soak in it, and probably also defecate in it. The water bowl should be changed at least daily to keep it clean, and you should check it regularly throughout the day to make sure it isn't soiled.

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What size habitat will my tortoise need?

One or two hatchlings will need a 15 gallon terrarium. Adults will need a much larger enclosure, and it is likely that you will have to build it yourself. For example, Leopard Tortoises and Red-footed Tortoises require an enclosure with a floor space that measures at least 4 feet by 8 feet. You may even have to turn a spare room into a tortoise habitat.

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Is it better to house tortoises outdoors?

In most cases, yes, but there are a number of factors you will need to consider. They include:

- Is the climate of your area comparable to your tortoise's natural environment?
- Is your tortoise otherwise healthy?
- Can you build a secure enclosure that will include all the things your tortoise needs to stay safe and happy?

In general, most tortoise species will do much better in an outdoor enclosure than they will in an indoor one. Even if you live in an area with cold winters, you should house your tortoise outdoors during the warmer summer months.

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How do I build an outdoor enclosure for my tortoise?

First, you will want to sink the fence at least 6" to 12" into the ground to prevent your tortoise from knocking it over and escaping. Make sure the area is safe and there are no poisonous plants or other hazardous items in the enclosure. Make sure to provide a shady area as well as a basking area. You will need to provide some kind of shelter or hiding spot, such as a dog house, large pet carrier, or even a well built plywood box. Cover the floor inside the hiding spot with a layer of fluffy hay. If temperatures drop below 60°F in your area, you will need to have an indoor enclosure so you can bring your tortoise inside during that time.

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What items should I put in my tortoise's habitat?

Whether you keep your tortoise in an indoor or an outdoor enclosure, you will need to provide plenty of hiding places and items to give the habitat a naturalistic feel. We recommend the use of large rocks for basking and clay pots, cardboard boxes, and live or artificial plants for hiding places.

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Can I house my tortoise outside when it's young?

No, tortoises should be kept inside until they are old enough and large enough to fend for themselves. When you do move them to an outdoor enclosure, make the transition slowly. Put them outside for a few days at a time, and monitor them closely to make sure they are eating and are not stressed.

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What temperatures are safe for tortoises?

Most tortoises should be housed between 71° and 86°F, with a hotter temperature in the basking area. Actual preferred optimum temperature range (POTR) will vary by species, so speak to your veterinarian about what the best temperature for your tortoise is. Tortoises from drier, more arid regions will need higher temperatures, while species that are native to jungle habitats will need lower temperatures. Always monitor temperature with thermometers.

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Do tortoises need a humid environment or a dry one?

Again, this varies widely by species. Tortoises from arid environments will need a low humidity, while those from jungle environments will need high humidity. Ask your

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veterinarian which humidity levels are best for your tortoise, and always monitor humidity with a hygrometer.

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What substrate should I use in my tortoise's habitat?

The kind of substrate you use will depend on the species and its humidity requirements. Tortoises that need low humidity levels will do best on sand, gravel, or rock. Tortoises that need high humidity should be housed on orchid bark, peat, or moss, as these will help maintain humidity by retaining moisture.

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What kind of lighting does my tortoise need?

Tortoises are diurnal, and they need significant exposure to UV light. If you are housing your tortoise outdoors, natural lighting will be sufficient. If you are housing it indoors, you will need to use timers and artificial lighting to provide a cycle of 12 to 14 hours of light followed by 10 to 12 hours of darkness. Use a basking lamp over the basking area, and use a UV heat lamp that provides both UVA and UVB light for your main lighting.

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Why does my tortoise need UV light?

There are two types of UV light - UVA and UVB. UVA promotes proper activity levels, appetite, and breeding. UVB light encourages Vitamin D3 production, which helps your tortoise to properly metabolize calcium and helps to prevent metabolic bone disease. It also simulates a natural environment, which decreases stress. Both types of UV light are necessary to maintain good health and well-being.

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Do tortoises need to hibernate?

Some species do, but some, including tropical species such as Hinge-backed Tortoises and African Spurred Tortoises, do not. If you are not sure if your tortoise hibernates, ask your veterinarian. Even if your tortoise is supposed to hibernate, it must only be allowed to do so if it is good health, and you must be sure to provide a nutritious diet in the months leading up to the hibernation.

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