FAQs: Turtles

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

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How long do turtles live?

Turtles' life spans vary by species, but it is commonly 25 years or more. Some turtles, such as the American Box Turtle, can live upwards of 100 years.

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How big do turtles get?

The size of a turtle is dictated by his species. They can range in size from 4" for the Bog Turtle, to 80" for the Leathery Turtle, that can weigh in at over 1500 lbs. The largest North American turtle is the Alligator Snapping Turtle, which can weigh up to 170 lbs.

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What is a turtle's shell made of?

A turtle's shell is made up of 60 different bones that are all connected. The domed top is called a carapace, and the bottom plate is called the plastron. The shell is covered with plates called scutes that are derivatives of skin. These provide additional strength and protection for the turtle.

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Where are turtles found?

Turtles can be found on every continent but Antarctica. They will live in almost all climates that are warm enough to allow them to complete their breeding cycles. Several species of turtles are native to North America, while only two are native to Europe.

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What is the difference between an aquatic turtle and a semi-aquatic turtle?

An aquatic turtle will spend the majority of his life in or near the water, while a semi-aquatic turtle will spend a greater amount of time on the land, but will still periodically go in the water.

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What do turtles eat?

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That depends on the kind of a turtle. Most aquatic turtles are primarily carnivores, and their diet will consist of 65% to 90% meat. Most semi-aquatic turtles are omnivores, and their diet will need to include about 50% meat and 50% vegetable based food. However, this is not an absolute. Some tropical aquatic turtles require a significant amount of fruit in their diet or are herbivores. Be sure to research your species' diet thoroughly and talk to your veterinarian about it. In addition, many turtles will need to be given a vitamin and calcium supplement regularly.
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What does a carnivorous diet include?

Meat components could include live feeder fish, store-bought earthworms, frozen pinkie mice , and commercial turtle food. The smaller vegetable components could include dandelion or collard greens, clover, or grated carrots.
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What does an omnivorous diet include?

Sources of meat could include live crickets, store-bought earthworms, and commercial turtle food. Sources of fruits and vegetables could include endive, grated carrot, dandelion greens, collard greens, cantaloupe, berries, and strawberries.
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What size habitat will my turtle need?

You will need at least a 10 gallon tank for a hatchling. Adult turtles will need a much larger habitat. The enclosure size will depend on the carapace length (CL) of an adult turtle. Adults may require a 75 to 150 gallon tank. For example, a turtle with a CL of 8" will need at least a 20 gallon tank. The Red-eared Slider will reach a CL of 12", and it would need a 120 gallon tank. Before purchasing a turtle, research the species you are interested in to see if you will be able to provide enough space for a suitably sized habitat.
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What should I put in the habitat?

Your turtle's habitat should include a land area, a water area, decorations such as plants and logs, and hiding places. Substrate is optional in an aquatic setup, but should be used in a semi-aquatic setup. What kind of substrate you use will depend on the species, but the most commonly used are soil, sand, aquarium gravel, or various kinds of moss.
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Why do I need to provide hiding places?

Hiding places will give your turtle a sense of security and give the habitat a more naturalistic feel. They should be situated on land for semi-aquatic turtles and in water for aquatic turtles. You can use wooden enclosures, logs, plants, and driftwood.
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If my turtle is aquatic, why does he need a land area in his enclosure?

All turtles need a land area in their habitat for basking during the day. The difference lies in how big the land area will be. Aquatic turtles will require only a small basking area, such as a turtle dock, a rock, or a piece of wood. Semi-aquatic turtles will require a larger land area, anywhere between 1/3 and 1/2 of the total tank area.
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What kind of lighting does my turtle require?

Turtles are diurnal, which means they are most active during the day and they need significant amounts of UV light. Most turtles require a natural light cycle of 12 to 14

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hours of light followed by 10 to 12 hours of darkness. Increase the length of the light period in the summer and decrease it in the winter. Use UVB lights for your main lighting and basking lamps for the basking area, and use a timer to maintain proper cycles.
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Why is UV light so important for my turtle?

In full spectrum light, two types of UV light are produced - UVA and UVB. UVA promotes proper activity levels, appetite, and breeding. UVB light encourages Vitamin D3 production, which helps your turtle to properly metabolize calcium. 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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What temperature should my turtle's habitat be?

There are two temperatures you will need to monitor - air temperature and water temperature. For air temperature, most turtles have a preferred optimum temperature range (POTR) that falls between 71° and 86°F. The basking area should be the hottest part of the cage, and it is generally between 80° and 85°F. Of course, this will vary by species, so you must research your individual turtle's needs.

Water temperature should fall around 78° F, but again, this varies by species. You will probably need to use a submersible aquarium heater or under tank heater to maintain the appropriate temperature.

Always use thermometers to monitor temperatures. Improperly high or low temperatures can result in decreased appetite, refusal of food, illness, and even death.
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What humidity levels do turtles require?

Required humidity levels will vary widely by species. Aquatic turtles and those semi-aquatic turtles that spend more time in the water will obviously need a very high level of humidity, while more terrestrial turtles generally need a lower humidity level. Verify proper humidity levels for your turtle with your veterinarian and always monitor them with a hygrometer.
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Do I need to use a filter in my turtle tank?

Definitely! Turtles produce a lot of waste, and if you didn't use a filter, you would have to do daily water changes to maintain adequate water quality. Using a filter will ensure that the habitat will be safe, clean, and sanitary for your turtle. We recommend the use of a canister filter, as that type of filter will be better able to handle the high amounts of waste. Even with the use of a filter, you will still need to do large water changes at least every two weeks.
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Are turtles social animals?

Most turtles can be social with other members of the same species, if you have a tank large enough to house more than one, but they generally aren't very interested in interacting with humans. Many don't even like to be touched or picked up, which is part of why they don't make good pets for children. When a child realizes that they can't carry their new pet around, they tend to lose interest.
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Do turtles carry *Salmonella*?

Yes, all reptiles can infect humans with *Salmonella*. Every reptile should be

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considered to be a carrier of *Salmonella*. *Salmonella* is shed in their feces. However, you can easily avoid exposing yourself to it by washing your hands thoroughly with hot, soapy water immediately after handling your turtle or anything in his habitat.

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Why do turtles need to hibernate?

Technically, they don't - only mammals hibernate; reptiles "brumate." Brumation is how reptiles deal with temperature extremes, and in many species, it is necessary for breeding. Reptiles are cold-blooded, and they cannot easily digest food when it is cold outside. When turtles brumate, their body metabolism slows down drastically to the point where the turtle is awake, but very sluggish, and needs to use very little energy. American Box turtles brumate, as do Red-eared Sliders and Snapping turtles.

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Where does the Red-eared Slider get its name?

Their name is derived from the patch of red that most of these turtles have behind each eye stretching back along the sides of their head.

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