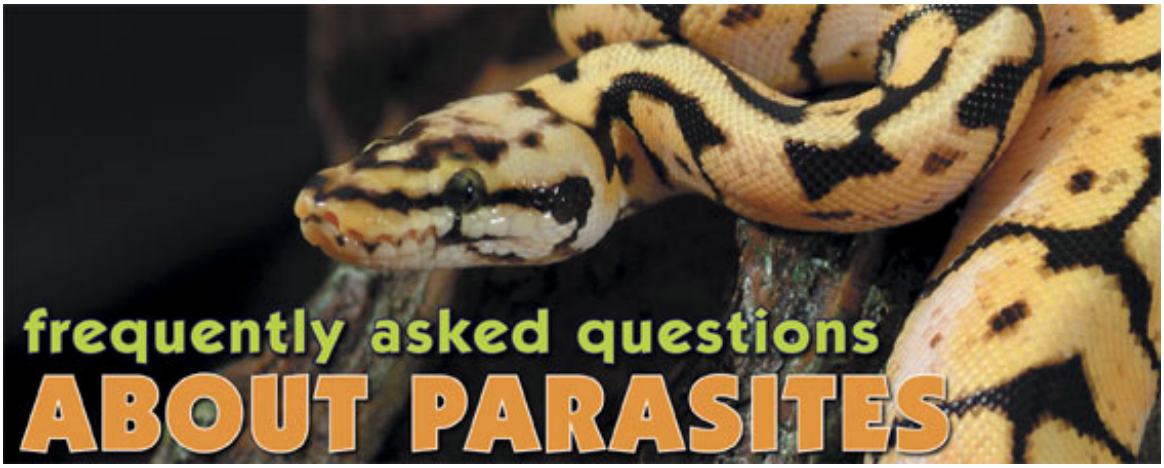
FAQs: Parasites

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



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What is a parasite?

A parasite is an organism that lives on or in the body of your reptile. It does not contribute to the survival of the host, and it can either have no effect or a negative effect on your herp's health.

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Do captive bred reptiles have parasites?

Many reptile owners feel that since their reptiles are not wild-caught, they don't have parasites. The truth is that captive bred herps are much more likely to have a higher number of parasites in or on their body than wild herps because the conditions of captivity are more conducive to the parasite's survival.

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Can my herp have parasites and not be sick?

Yes, most reptiles carry certain parasites that are native to their natural environment. They have evolved to a point where they can coexist without harm to your herp. In some cases a certain level of a parasite may help the herp to defeat other parasitic infections or complete a natural life cycle.

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Why are parasites that are no problem in the wild an issue in captivity?

When herps are in their natural environment, the parasites within their bodies are native to that environment. The host and the parasite have achieved a balance that is mutually beneficial to both. However, when a reptile is in captivity, there are sources of stress that do not exist in the wild. No matter how elaborate your setup is, you will never be able to exactly duplicate their natural environment, and this will affect the delicate balance, causing an excess of what was previously a harmless parasite.

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When do natural parasites make my herp sick?

Though reptiles carry parasites without being negatively affected by them, it is in captivity that such "natural" parasites begin to cause a problem. Stress due to rehousing, improper housing (lighting, temperature, landscaping, etc.), and improper diet can throw the system out of balance, allowing one or more parasites to progress from inhabitation to infection. This is yet another reason why thoroughly researching your reptile and setting up proper housing before bringing him home is so important.

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What are the symptoms of parasitic infection?

Symptoms of a parasitic infection can include:

- Decreased appetite or anorexia
- Weight loss
- Lethargy
- Diarrhea or frequent loose stool
- Stool with a very strong odor
- Dehydration
- Vomiting
- Failure to grow
- Sunken eyes
- Bloated or thin stomach
- Significant food intake without growing in size

How many of the above symptoms you see will generally depend on the severity and type of infection.

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How do I know if I need to get my herp's stool tested?

If your herp has parasites, the stool will mostly likely have one or all of the following:

- A change in color
- A change in consistency
- Pieces of undigested food
- A very strong odor

Changes in stool that last for longer than a couple days should always be cause enough to have a fecal test run.

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How are parasites diagnosed?

How parasites are diagnosed will depend on what type of parasite it is. External parasites are often visible. If it is an internal parasite, the only way to diagnose it will be to take a stool sample to your veterinarian for testing or have blood work done. We recommend that you find an experienced reptile veterinarian, as one who doesn't generally treat reptiles isn't going to be as knowledgeable about what is normal and what requires treatment.

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What is the treatment for parasites?

Treatment usually consists of oral administration of an antiparasitic drug and disinfecting the environment regularly to prevent reinfection. Which drug you use to treat the infection will depend on what parasite your herp has. Some of the more commonly used medications include febendazole, metronidazole, and Ivermectin. It is important to follow the treatment protocol your veterinarian lays out exactly, as failing to complete treatment or overmedicating can cause serious health issues for your reptile.

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Can I buy over-the-counter treatments?

There are some commercial, over-the-counter reptile treatments, such as Natural Chemistry Reptile Relief, that can be helpful. Jurassi-Mite is used as a topical spray to treat fleas, ticks, and mites, and it can be sprayed directly on your reptile and his environment.

However, if the issue is a worm infestation, you must get a prescription for a de-wormer from your veterinarian. Though there are commercial products available, they are not formulated for dealing with specific worms, and failing to treat for the correct worm can actually make the problem worse. It is also easy to overdose your reptile on OTC worm medications. Using a medication prescribed by your veterinarian ensures that you will be treating for the right problem, and that you will get the proper dosage and follow-up care instructions.

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How do I prevent parasites?

There are a few things that you can do to prevent parasitic infections.

- **Keep the enclosure clean.**
  This may mean daily cleaning, but it's easier and less time consuming to clean the cage regularly than it is to treat a sick reptile. Research what you need to clean and when for your specific reptile species, set up a schedule,

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and stick to it. If you have an aquatic or semi-aquatic herp, use a filtration system and do regular partial and full water changes. Remove uneaten live food to prevent it from walking through feces before your reptile eats it. Never switch accessories between enclosures.

- **Always quarantine a new herp when you bring him into your home.**
  Never put a reptile you have just brought home in the enclosure with your other reptiles. Schedule a veterinary appointment, have a stool sample tested, and don't allow him to have any contact with your other reptiles until he receives a clean bill of health from your veterinarian. This includes indirect contact - be sure to wash your hands thoroughly after handling the new herp or anything in his enclosure before you interact with your other reptiles.
- **Have your veterinarian perform annual fecal exams and bloodwork to check for parasites.**
  It is possible to miss signs of a parasite infection if they are minor or if you don't know what to look for. Being proactive in checking for them may reveal a problem you didn't know existed.
- **Only feed feeder insects or whole prey from reputable distributors.**
  Distributors that do not care for their feeder insects properly before shipping them to you may expose your reptile to parasites. Additionally, wild caught insects may carry parasites as well. Only purchase from quality distributors, and consider switching if your reptile develops a parasite infection seemingly out of nowhere.

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How do parasites pass between herps?

Parasites are most commonly passed through oral-fecal contact. This occurs when the affected reptile sheds the parasite in his stool, and another herp comes into contact with the stool or eats something that has come into contact with the stool. Parasites can also be shed in bodily fluids such as mucous or saliva. Spread of infection is more likely to occur in overcrowded terrariums.

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What are the two primary groups of parasites and which is the most dangerous?

The two groups of parasites are ectoparasites and endoparasites. Ectoparasites are external parasites. They live on the host, and can be found on the skin or scales or in the mouth. This group includes parasites like ticks, mites, chiggers, and leeches. Unless left untreated for long periods of time, this group presents little risk to your herp.

Endoparasites are internal parasites. They live within the host, and they present a much more serious problem than ectoparasites. If left untreated, they will cause serious health issues and eventually death. There are four sub-groups of endoparasites:

- Protozoa
- Trematodes
- Cestodes
- Nematodes

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Places these parasites can be found include intestines, digestive tract, blood stream, internal organs, and other locations.

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What are some common parasites?

Some parasites are more common in some reptile species than in others. For example, Bearded Dragons are extremely susceptible to coccidia infections. Other common reptile parasites include:

- Pinworms
- Roundworms
- Tapeworms
- Hemoparasites
- Lungworms
- Filarial worms

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