Lizard Tail Loss: Why It Happens & What To Do

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Many lizards have developed a defense mechanism called "autotomy," or, more simply, they are able to drop their tail when they are threatened by a predator. These lizards' tails often have aspects that draw a predator's attention, such as being brightly colored, having sharply contrasting colors or patterns, or moving when the lizard is otherwise still. Though this is a natural reaction to what the lizard perceives as a threatening situation, it is still stressful for the lizard, and there are things that you should do to facilitate proper healing and, for some species, regrowth.

How It Works

Lizards that can drop their tail have "fracture planes" spaced regularly down the length of the tail. These are either between vertebrae or in the middle of each vertebra, depending on the species, and it is at these points where the break can occur. Skin, muscles, blood supply, nerves, and bone separate when the tail is dropped. After it falls to the ground, the tail starts to wiggle and move on the ground, hopefully giving the lizard a chance to escape while the predator is focused on the moving tail.

What Effects It Has

Tail loss, though natural, does cause some issues for the lizard. First, it will generally affect the lizard's sense of balance, and it may have trouble climbing or walking regularly until it adjusts to the lack of a tail. For a lizard that stores fat in its tail, it also results in the loss of critical fat deposits. Juvenile lizards stop growing while the tail is healing and regenerating, and, in adults, the reproductive processes stop. Healing and regenerating the tail also takes a significant amount of energy, or protein, so lizards that have dropped their tail are at a greater threat for nutritional deficiencies. Finally, losing their tail makes a lizard more susceptible to predators, as it no longer has anything to drop if it is caught to give itself time to escape.

What You Should Do

If your lizard drops its tail, there are a number of things that you should do to ensure it recovers as quickly as possible without any complications.

When it happens,

- Soak the lizard in a mixture of warm water and Betadine that is chest high for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Change the water if the lizard goes to

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the bathroom in it, or if it gets too cool.

- After soaking, flush the end of the tail with Betadine.
- Put triple antibiotic ointment on the stump.

Put triple antibiotic ointment on the end of the tail every night for one week or for as long as it takes the end of the tail to heal over.

To promote quick healing and regrowth,

- Keep the enclosure clean and spotless to prevent contamination of the wound and infection.
- Provide a proper diet to ensure that your lizard gets the nourishment it needs and heals as quickly as possible.
- Make sure that your lizard gets enough calcium, as hypocalcemia can delay the healing process.
- Maintain the environment in the habitat properly.
- Avoid putting your lizard in stressful situations.

We recommend maintaining temperatures at the upper end of your lizard's optimal temperature range. Keep the setup of the enclosure simple so you can clean it easily, but be sure to provide the necessities, such as a hide box and some form of safe substrate, like cage carpet.

If the tail break is incomplete, or if the break was very close to the body, schedule a veterinary appointment as soon as possible. Incomplete tail breaks may require stitches or amputation by your veterinarian, and a break that is close to the body may bleed profusely, requiring stitches to close the wound. A tail that has to be amputated by a veterinarian can still grow back.

What Happens After

As the break heals, you should expect to see the exposed muscle bundles fold over the bone that is showing. The end will dry out, forming a cap over the stump, and then skin will start to grow over that. There will be some swelling initially, but if there is any swelling at the break site that has not gone down within one week, schedule a veterinary appointment.

Many lizards will regenerate their tail, especially if they are young lizards. However, the tail is generally not the same length or color as it was before, and it may have abnormal scales or patterns. A tail that has been regenerated has a rod of cartilage in it rather than bone, and it usually cannot be dropped again. If the tail is going to regenerate, it should do so quickly, assuming that the level of supportive care is adequate.

How You Can Prevent It

Since a lizard can drop its tail even if the tail hasn't been touched, it's important that you take care not to startle your lizard or make it feel threatened. Take time when you first get your lizard to learn how to interact with it and handle it correctly. Never hold your lizard by his tail, and never try to catch him by it. Once your lizard is comfortable with you holding it, you can stroke it down the length of its back and tail to get it used to being touched like that.

Tail loss is natural and very common, and with the proper care, your lizard will quickly recover.

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