



Herps that don't get enough calcium can suffer muscular, skeletal and neurological problems, including metabolic bone disease. However, help is available in the form of supplements—such as Repti Calcium from Zoo Med Laboratories Inc., shown sprinkled on this cricket.

Health Aids for Herps

Promote healthy pets—and return business—by stocking a wide range of specialized health aids and maintenance products for lizards, snakes and amphibians.

By Lisa Plummer

Reptiles seem to be the kinds of pets you can care for by following a checklist. Proper diet? Check. Enough lighting? Check. Once their basic needs are met, lizards, snakes, turtles and tortoises are fun and easy to maintain.

However, trouble starts when an owner doesn't know how to meet those requirements, said Dr. George Stoecklin of North Las Vegas Animal Hospital. Reptiles can develop calcium deficiencies, malnourishment, dehydration and bacterial infections—often because their first-time owners haven't been properly educated.

“People tend to get reptiles and not know anything about them whatsoever,” Stoecklin said. “They don't do their research, they don't know what they're supposed to do or they aren't told by the pet shop when they buy them. However, if you know what their needs are and you do those basic things, [reptiles are] pretty easy to keep.”

To promote healthier herps in general, you can stock a wide range of specialized health aids and maintenance products—and give new reptile owners good information on how to care for their pets.

Let's review basic health issues in herps as well as products that can help prevent or solve those issues.

Calcium Deficiencies

Captive reptiles commonly suffer from calcium deficiency, or hypocalcemia, related either to diet or light exposure, Stoecklin said. Calcium is crucial for proper bone formation, egg production and numerous biological functions. An imbalance can lead to muscular, skeletal and neurological problems, including metabolic bone disease. Herps also need a sufficient amount of vitamin D-3 to absorb calcium.

Repti Calcium, available with or without vitamin D-3, is an ultra-fine precipitated calcium carbonate supple-

ment that's sprinkled on the herp's food. The phosphorus-free particles from Zoo Med Laboratories Inc. (San Luis Obispo, Calif.) have a high surface area per gram for increased bioavailability—so more of the calcium gets into the herp's system.

Reptiles eat a lot of crickets and vegetables, which are high in phosphorus but low in calcium, according to biologist Shane Bagnall, a herpetologist at Zoo Med. Supplements can help balance that ratio, which should be 2-to-1, calcium to phosphorus.

Zilla Calcium Supplement, a liquid option from Zilla, a division of Central Aquatics (Franklin, Wis.), can be sprayed directly on a herp's food or into the pet's mouth. “The product can quickly and easily be applied to crickets, mealworms, fruits, vegetables and even pelletized or canned foods,” said Phillip Bartoszek, Zilla's reptile technician. “(It) adds necessary calcium to a reptile's food, which may be lacking from the items that make up its common captive diet.”

For pets that don't care for foods dusted with calcium, Nutra Bites Calcium Fortifier from Nature Zone (Chico, Calif.) consists of soft, bite-sized cubes that can be mixed right into a herp's diet.

“They're sort of like croutons on a salad,” said Paul Benson, Nature Zone's president. “Dusting leafy greens or fruits usually results in a soggy mess ... the small gel cubes were specifically developed to provide a palatable method of supplementing the (reptile) diet.” The cubes can also be fed to rodents to gut-load them before they're fed to carnivorous herps, he added.

Getting enough calcium into a herp's diet isn't enough. Reptiles need vitamin D-3 to efficiently absorb calcium—and a lack of it can result in metabolic bone disease. Sunlight or ultraviolet B light absorbed through the skin provide necessary vitamin D-3. However, if a herp isn't getting proper light, there are a few supplements on the market.

Nature Zone offers another gel cube to help balance and maintain daily vitamin levels. “Vitamin Booster contains safe levels of oil-soluble vitamins and enhanced levels of water-soluble vitamins that are shed daily,” Benson said. “It has strong initial and repeat

COMPARING HERP HEALTH AIDS

| PRODUCT | MANUFACTURER | ISSUE | BENEFITS |
|--|---------------------------|---|---|
| Repta-Aid | Fluker Farms | Dehydration and malnourishment | Provides energy and fluid support. |
| Xtra Medicated Diets Reptile Anti-Parasite | Jungle/UPG Aquatics | Internal parasites | Controls protozoans, nematodes and other intestinal worms. |
| Reptile Anti-Bacteria Xtra Medicated Diets | Jungle/UPG Aquatics | Internal and external bacterial infections | Controls enteritis, septicemia, coccidiosis, kidney disease, respiratory distress and eye infections. |
| Nutra Bites Calcium Fortifier | Nature Zone | Calcium deficiency | Supports bone growth. |
| Nutra Bites Vitamin Booster | Nature Zone | Vitamin deficiency | Boosts vitamin intake, including vitamin D-3, necessary for calcium absorption. |
| ReptoGuard Turtle Health Conditioner | Tetrafauna/UPG Aquatics | Salmonella and other external bacterial infections, fungal infections | Controls and prevents salmonella, other external bacterial and fungal infections. Mild and easy to use. Lasts up to 2 months. |
| Solar Drops | T-Rex Products | Vitamin D-3 deficiency | Delivers a controlled dose of vitamin D-3 to aid calcium absorption and prevent metabolic bone disease. Can also replace a UVB lighting system. |
| Jump Start Caloric Supplement & Appetite Stimulant | Zilla/Central Aquatics | Malnourishment and feeding problems | Delivers a concentrated dose of calories and vitamins. Easy to use. |
| Calcium Supplement | Zilla/Central Aquatics | Calcium deficiency | Can be sprayed directly on food for rapid absorption. |
| Repti Calcium | Zoo Med Laboratories Inc. | Calcium deficiency | Phosphorus-free precipitated calcium carbonate with high bioavailability. |

—Lisa Plummer

sales potential because its application is easy and should be universal.”

Solar Drops, a liquid form of vitamin D-3, are made for species that are active during the day. The supplement, available from T-Rex Products (Chula Vista, Calif.), has been on the market for more than a decade, according to John Coote, T-Rex director of research. For diurnal species like lizards, turtles and tortoises, it provides vitamin D-3 in the absence of proper light. It’s also an option for owners who can’t afford UV lamps.

“It is a much more cost-effective treatment for the regular maintenance of vitamin D-3 in captive reptiles than the provision of UVB-producing lamps,” Coote said. “It is also cheaper to use it to treat metabolic bone disease and just as effective as using these same lamps.”

Parasites

Intestinal parasites don’t distinguish between herps born in the wild or in

captivity, although they’re more common in wild-caught species. Parasites can cause lethargy, dehydration and loss of appetite. Owners who suspect an infection should address the problem immediately—especially to protect the household’s other herps.

Jungle Reptile Xtra Anti-Parasite medicated food, administered for a limited treatment period, is great for nipping a parasite problem in the bud, said Nick Kornblith, senior brand manager of nutrition and water care for United Pet Group Aquatics.

The medicated food is available in species-specific diets for turtles, bearded dragons, iguanas and tortoises. The lizard and tortoise diets are available in both pellet and meal formulas, and the turtle diet comes in pellets.

“These diets are great for acclimating a new animal, for those that are wild-caught, acting on the lethargic side and for getting their appetite back,” said Kornblith. “This can be part of

the regimen. Still, if there’s any doubt about an ailment, we always recommend taking the animal to the vet.”

Malnourishment, Dehydration

Newly acquired reptiles still adjusting to their environments commonly stop eating or drinking. Malnourishment and dehydration can further decrease a herp’s interest in food, but there are products available to encourage caloric and fluid intake.

Jump Start Caloric Supplement & Appetite Stimulant from Zilla helps provide essential calories and vitamins for animals that have stopped eating. Applied directly into the reptile’s mouth, the concentrated paste stimulates the animal’s appetite and encourages normal feeding.

Retailers should recommend this product to new herp owners so any drinking or eating problems can be addressed before severe dehydration or malnourishment develop, said



Fluker Farms kits for rehydrating and nourishing herps include a powdered formula, mixing cup, spoon and syringe.



Nutra Bites are soft gel supplements that can be sprinkled on a herp's food, like croutons on a salad.



Jump Start Formula from Zilla can help stimulate a herp's appetite.



Herp owners can fight parasites and bacteria with specialty formulas from Jungle, a UPG brand.



This dissolvable white turtle from Tetrafauna, a UPG brand, releases a gentle sulfa treatment that helps eliminate salmonella.



Vitamin D-3 comes in a liquid form in T-Rex's Solar Drops.

Daniel Lorica, Zilla's brand manager.

"Suggesting additional care products and supplements when a hobbyist purchases a reptile or food not only drives the sale of these consumables but also helps prevent any potential health issues by keeping the reptile healthy," said Lorica. "Education on proper reptile care from day one is the key to a successful relationship with your customer."

Another option is Repta-Aid Critical Care Formula from Fluker Farms (Port Allen, La.), which rehydrates and nourishes herps that have stopped eating. The herbivore and carnivore/insectivore formulas come in a kit that includes a powder, mixing cup, spoon and syringe.

"Marketing this item successfully starts with a properly trained sales staff that is familiar with the uses and benefits of this item," said Jenny Murphy, a Fluker Farms sales representative. "Because this is a specialty item, it is well-suited for the individual pet store that can provide their customers with one-on-one service."

Bacterial Infections

Poor tank hygiene or dirty water can lead to bacterial infections, which can be internal—enteritis, septicemia, kidney disease, respiratory distress and eye infections—or external, like cuts, sores and abrasions. For common bacterial issues, UPG offers Jungle Reptile Xtra Anti-Bacterial diets, available in pellets and meal like the company's anti-parasite formulas.

A slow-dissolving medicated block shaped like a turtle can be used to prevent salmonella in turtle tanks. The Tetrafauna ReptoGuard Turtle Health Conditioner from UPG (Blacksburg, Va.) works by releasing a sulfa treatment into the water. "This is a very mild product that can be used prophylactically each time you change the water," Kornblith said. "Since it's a general water treatment, it's a good mover and is not just purchased for when the animal is sick."

The treatment also helps control common external bacterial and fungal maladies that affect aquatic herps, he said, adding, "[It's] considered a must-stock for any pet store that carries water turtles and/or amphibians."

Happy Herps, Happy Customers

Reptiles have different requirements when it comes to diet, light, humidity and living conditions. Retailers can educate owners about meeting those needs and recommend the right health aids to maintain healthy pets.

Staff members should understand these products, how to use them and when to recommend them. It'll help increase store sales and foster trusting relationships with reptile customers.

Happy, healthy herps bring years of enjoyment to their human families, and the more satisfied customers are, the more likely they'll return. **pa**

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