



Warren Woods Veterinary Hospital

29157 Schoenherr Road

Warren MI 48088

Telephone: 586-751-3350 Fax: 586-751-3447

www.wvhcares.com

Leopard Gecko: Care and Husbandry

Leopard geckos are reptiles native to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. They live in dry, rocky regions and are terrestrial, meaning they prefer to stay on the ground. Leopard geckos are nocturnal and most active during the night. They have a triangular shaped head and a raised, bumpy texture to the skin which helps them stay camouflaged. They measure eight to eleven inches in length when mature. Their large, wide tail stores excess fat for times when food is scarce.



The ideal habitat for a single gecko is a fifteen gallon aquarium with a screened lid. Male leopard geckos are territorial and may fight therefore they should not be housed together. A male and female gecko may be housed together if they have an aquarium of at least twenty gallons. Acceptable substrates for the bottom of your enclosure can include paper towels, newspaper, butcher paper, terrarium liners, rabbit alfalfa food pellets or recycled paper products. Calcium sand is not a good choice because it can be ingested which may cause intestinal impaction. Wood shavings, walnut shells and sand are all inappropriate choices as these can be harmful if ingested, can carry parasites and irritating dusts and oils.

A gecko will need several houses, rocks and branches in the enclosure to enable it to hide during the day. Artificial plants and decorations may be used to create a more natural looking habitat as long as the gecko does not try to ingest these items. The enclosure should be cleaned with mild soap and warm water as needed. The enclosure should be cleaned regularly usually once weekly will suffice; with water and a mild soap.

Leopard geckos need a humidity box on one end of the cage. This may be a house or box with a hole in it which is filled with moist peat or sphagnum moss. The moss should be replaced weekly to prevent bacterial growth. The humidity box is needed to aid the reptile in shedding the skin. The ideal humidity for a leopard gecko is 30-40%; this can be measured with a hygrometer placed in the enclosure.

A clean water source should be provided in the enclosure. The water dish needs to be large enough for your gecko to be able to soak in and climb out of it themselves. The water should be shallow

enough that your gecko is not completely submerged. Leopard geckos might not recognize this as a water source at first so it is very important to mist them lightly once a day to keep them hydrated. A warm water soak once a week is also recommended to keep them hydrated, aid in defecation and shedding.

A heat lamp, ceramic heat emitter is important to maintain the appropriate temperature. The ideal temperature for a leopard gecko is 82-90 degrees Fahrenheit with one side being slightly cooler (about 5 degrees) than the other. This difference in temperature allows your gecko to cool off and avoid overheating. These temperatures are monitored with two thermometers, one on each side of the cage. Your gecko should have 12 hours of daylight (white light) and 12 hours of darkness for its natural biorhythms. A timer purchased from a pet supply store or hardware store can be utilized to maintain this twelve hour light cycle. At night, the temperature in the enclosure should drop slightly, about 10 degrees, as it would in their natural habitat. Night temperatures should also be closely monitored and ceramic heat emitters, red, blue or purple reptile night bulbs can aid in increasing night temperatures if needed. Always use reptile specific heat bulbs which have modifications that benefit the reptile and helps stimulates eating.

An ultraviolet light is beneficial for the health of leopard geckos. This reptile specific bulb produces UVA and UVB rays and is purchased from your local pet supply store. The UVB rays are important for the natural production of vitamin D which helps the gecko absorb calcium from its diet. Without the UV bulb your gecko cannot properly absorb calcium which leads to metabolic bone disease. UV bulbs for reptiles come in two different forms the compact (coil) bulb and the linear florescent tube. While there are many companies that produce UV bulbs, Zoo Med and Zilla are recommended. Follow manufacturer recommendations to determine the type of UV bulb you purchase, and the distance to place the bulb from your leopard gecko. All UV bulbs need to be changed every 6-12 months based on manufacturer's recommendations. After that time, even if the bulb still turns on it is not producing the vital rays your gecko needs for calcium metabolism. Plastic and glass windows are designed to block UVB rays so keeping the tank by a window will not provide essential UVB rays. It is ideal to provide monitored time outside on a warm day in an escape proof enclosure with access to shelter. Natural sunlight is the best source of essential UV rays.

Heat rocks should not be used as they can cause burns since reptiles do not sense a "localized" temperature. Heating pads under the tank may be used with supervision. Place your hand on the area of the tank with the heating pad; if it is too hot for your hand to rest on for long periods of time then it is too hot for your gecko.

The leopard gecko occasionally sheds its skin. Frequency of skin shedding varies depending on the age and growth rate of the gecko. The gecko's color gets dull before it begins to shed. The shed skin may not be noticed in the habitat because it is normal for a gecko to eat it. This is an instinctive behavior that wild geckos perform so predators can't find their hiding place. It is important to check a gecko after it has finished shedding to make sure all of the skin has been removed. Any remaining dead skin can be removed by soaking the lizard in a warm water bath.

Leopard geckos are insectivores. The majority of the leopard gecko diet should consist of crickets and mealworms. Silkworms, butterworms, waxworms and hornworms may also be fed. Pre-killed pinkie mice can be offered occasionally to adults. It is important to offer a variety of food to ensure optimum health. Crickets and other bugs should be "gut loaded", in which the insects are fed nutritious foods before being given to the lizard. Gut loading food is available at pet supply stores.

Insects should not be larger than one-half to three-quarters the size of the space between a gecko's eyes. Offer only the number of insects that can be eaten at one time. Live insects left in the enclosure may chew on a reptile and can cause injury. A commercial leopard gecko food may also be offered. The best time to feed the gecko is at night, when it is most active.

Leopard geckos do not produce enough calcium themselves and therefore it must be supplemented in their food. This can be done by purchasing a calcium D3 powder from your local area pet store. This powder is sprinkled on food 3-4 times a week for juvenile geckos (under one year old) or breeding females and 2-3 times a week for adult geckos. The calcium can be applied to live food by placing the insects and powder in a bag together and shaking lightly.

Hibernation can be dangerous to your Leopard gecko if not done properly and therefore should only be attempted by an experienced keeper with aid from your veterinarian. Hibernation is an instinctual act, usually during the cooler months, during which your gecko's appetite and activity will drastically decrease. This act is stimulated by your leopard gecko's natural instincts along with differences in the temperature of the environment and the shortening of days. Maintaining the same temperature and light cycle in your enclosure during the winter months will help prevent hibernation.

An annual examination with a reptile veterinarian is important to ensure a gecko is in good health. Leopard geckos are very good at hiding illness; this is a survival mechanism that many wild animals share. It is important to see a veterinarian at the first sign of illness. Common diseases for geckos include intestinal impaction, metabolic bone disease, parasites, respiratory infections, adenovirus, mites and egg binding. Following proper husbandry guidelines may decrease the incidence of some ailments.