

Leopard Gecko Care Sheet

This care sheet is designed only as a brief introductory guide to keeping these fascinating reptiles. Before you decide whether to bring a leopard gecko into your family please consult some of the many excellent books and websites available as well as talking to your vet or veterinary nurse at this practice.

The Leopard Gecko

The leopard gecko is a nocturnal ground dwelling gecko normally found in Southern central Asia, from Afganistan, through Pakistan and into India. They are relatively easy to keep, and a good choice for the beginner. They have a long life span of 15-20 years in captivity so be sure you are able to commit to the care of the animals for years to come.

Physical characteristics

The Leopard gecko has yellow, brown, white, and, most recently, leucistic phases. There are usually dark brown spots on a white or pale yellow background. Young geckos have alternating bands of color which gradually break up into the spots or splotches as the animal ages. The skin has many knoblike bumps, giving it a rough appearance, though the skin is soft to the touch. The male is more heavily built than the female with a broader head and thicker neck. Males also have a V-shaped row of pre-anal pores, a wider tail base and post-anal swellings. Leopard geckos are unusual in that they have eyelids. They do not have clinging toe pads, so they cannot climb vertical surfaces.

Feeding

The leopard gecko needs a clean, shallow supply of water which should be changed daily. Feed juveniles once a day, and adults every other day. It is a good idea to regularly weigh your pet as weight loss is a common sign of ill health and so that you can reduce the amount fed if your pet starts to look overweight. Obesity can be a problem for some geckos.

Preparing insects for food: Freshly moulted insects are easier for the leopard gecko to digest. Feeder insects should be coated with calcium supplement (powdered calcium carbonate or calcium gluconate) before feeding. The insects should also be "gut-loaded," which means the insects are fed nutritious and vitamin-rich foods for at least 24 hours before they are given to the gecko. Good foods to feed the insects include carrot peelings, green leafy vegetables, sweet potato, squash, cuttlefish and other vegetables. There are also commercial products rich in calcium and vitamins which can be fed to the insects. Insects may be purchased or wild-caught (without the use of pesticides).

Uneaten insects may attack a sleeping, small or unwell gecko and so should not be left in the tank with the dragon unsupervised, particularly overnight.

Food particle size: It is very important that the size of food be proportional to the size of the animal. Malnourishment, seizures, and intestinal blockages can occur if hatchlings and juveniles are fed insects that are too large for them to capture or digest. As a guideline the length of the insect should not exceed two thirds of the distance between the animal's eyes.

Housing

Enclosure: Vivaria (glass walled or fronted enclosures) are most commonly used to house leopard geckos. If wood is used to make the vivarium this should be properly sealed to facilitate cleaning. The vivarium should not be kept in direct sunlight as they can easily overheat. Ensure that the vivarium is secure and well ventilated. The enclosure should be as big as possible but a tank measuring 3ft x 2ft x 2ft is the minimum size for 1-2 adults. Leopard geckos live on land, and generally do not climb, therefore it is important to have a long, shallow aquarium or other housing unit, versus a tall, short one.

Substrate: The substrate is what lines the bottom of the cage. An ideal substrate is one that is inexpensive, aesthetically pleasing, easily cleaned, absorbent, and digestible if swallowed. Substrate can be flat newspaper, sheets of brown wrapping paper (the kind that comes in rolls), reptile matting or cork or slate tiles. Do **NOT** use cedar shavings, gravel, crushed corn cob, kitty litter, wood shavings, or potting soil that contains vermiculite, pesticides, fertilizer, or wetting agents. In particular, avoid Calcsand. Although this is commonly sold as safe for reptiles it can cause eye problems and intestinal blockages. Sand easily sticks to food and so can be ingested, building up in the intestines, and so is not recommended if you feed your gecko in his or her vivarium.

Landscaping and 'Furniture': Rocks for climbing and basking under the secondary heat source should be secure. These should be of various sizes, clean and non-toxic. Reptiles like places where they can hide. This could be an empty cardboard box, cardboard tube, or flower pot. If your gecko does not use its hiding place, try a different one or move it to a different location. If possible offer more than one hide.

Appropriate plants in the enclosure can provide humidity, shade, and a sense of security. They also add an aesthetic quality to the enclosure. Be sure they are nontoxic. *Dracaena*, *Ficus benjamina*, and hibiscus are good choices. Be sure the plants have not been treated with pesticides and the potting soil does not contain vermiculite, pesticides, fertilizer, or wetting agents. Washing the plant with a water spray and watering it thoroughly several times to the point where water runs out of the bottom of the pot, should help remove toxic chemicals, which may have been used. Keeping purchased plants in a different part of the house for a while before putting them in the enclosure will also be helpful.

If you have more than one

Do not house two male leopard geckos together, as they will fight. If you house a group of females, or a male and female together, increase the tank size as you add animals. Leopard geckos are one of the easiest reptiles to breed but remember to seek advice from your vet or veterinary nurse before breeding and consider whether you will be able to find good homes for the babies.

Larger geckos may keep smaller cage mates away from food and heat sources, and may even see them as food. If housing leopard geckos together, a larger cage will decrease the possibility of aggression; nevertheless, monitor the geckos closely and separate them if there is any sign of aggression.

Heating and light

Temperature

Leopard geckos have the same body temperature as their surroundings. They come from desert environments, and require supplemental heat to be healthy and carry out their bodily functions such as digestion. They prefer 75-85°F during the day and temperatures in the 70's at night. If a reptile is cold, it cannot properly digest its food and is more likely to become ill. Lizards like a temperature gradient so if they are cold, they can move to a warmer part of the cage and vice versa. Place a good quality thermostat in the cage at the level the gecko spends most of its time so that the temperature is automatically regulated.

Primary heat source: A primary heat source is necessary to keep the temperature of the entire cage within the proper range. A ceramic infrared heat emitters or panels which produce heat, but little visible light, can be used. Alternatively, a series of incandescent lights over the cage can be used but at night these lights will need to be turned off and another heat source may be needed depending on the ambient temperature. For larger enclosures, a space heater or separate room thermostat can be used to keep the room at the appropriate temperature. Fire alarms should be placed in rooms where lights or other heat sources are used.

Secondary heat source: A secondary heat source creates more heat in specific areas of the cage to provide a temperature gradient. To best supply this gradient, the secondary heat source should cover only 25-30% of the surface of the enclosure. There are also special 'basking lights' available. Either type of light should shine down on a particular basking area from outside the cage or from behind a guard. The temperature under the light in the hottest site should be 90°F. Hatchlings housed in smaller aquariums will require lights of lower wattage, or the vivarium temperature may become too warm very quickly. Do not use hot rocks as heat sources. Like the primary heat source this heat should be under the control of a thermostat to keep temperatures within the correct range.

Ultraviolet light: Leopard geckos are nocturnal and do not have the need for strong ultraviolet light-B (UVB) as many other species but provision of a 2% bulb during the day is recommended to aid in vitamin D formation,

required for a healthy skeleton.

Moist box: Leopard geckos require a humidity of 40-60% for proper shedding. To make a moist box to aid shedding place moist peat moss in a hidebox made from plastic or Tupperware box, with a small entry hole. Mist the peat periodically to keep it moist. Most adult geckos will shed once a month whereas younger geckos can shed as frequently as every week. Seek prompt veterinary advice if your gecko is experiencing problems shedding.

Temperament and handling

Leopard geckos tend to be curious and will enjoy exploring so, if you can, provide a safe, larger enclosure. Although it is very unusual for leopard geckos to bite they can do so.

To pick up a leopard gecko, place your hand under its abdomen and gently scoop it up. Do not handle your gecko by the tail as the tail can drop off. It may regrow but will not look the same.

Reproduction

Leopard geckos reach sexual maturity and start to breed between 8 and 9 months. The female will generally lay 2 eggs in a clutch 21-28 days after mating. If fertile, the eggs will hatch in 45-60 days. Unmated females may also lay eggs. During egg laying female leopard geckos require additional calcium.

Hygiene

The cage and food and water bowls should be cleaned routinely. Rinse the items well after cleaning. Like all reptiles, geckos can harbour the bacteria *Salmonella* which is dangerous to people, along with other potentially seriously harmful organisms. Be sure to wash your hands after handling the gecko or its cage. Children, the elderly, pregnant or sick should not come into direct contact with reptiles nor contaminated materials. Always seek prompt medical attention should you become unwell.

Veterinary care

Most of the medical problems experienced by leopard geckos can be prevented by paying close attention to good husbandry and nutrition but they can still develop just as many health problems as any other pet. Often a gecko will try to conceal signs of ill health so if you are worried in any way seek prompt veterinary advice. Common problems to look out for include weight loss, diarrhoea, retained skin especially around the head, eyes and digits, loss of appetite or constipation. Your vet is the best person to advise you about your pet's health and will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Rather than wait for a problem to occur why not make an appointment for your gecko to have a regular check up, just as you would with a dog or cat.

Pet Insurance

Pet insurance is available for leopard geckos and means that financial concerns do not add to the worry of having a sick pet.