

TORTOISES AS PETS



Australian freshwater tortoises purchased in South Australia are usually the Murray short-necked (*Emydura macquarii*) however, the long-necked (*Chelododina longiicolis*) is also available.

Freshwater tortoises are reptiles with clawed, webbed feet. They are usually the size of a 20 cent piece when sold, and can grow to about the size of a large dinner plate when mature. Sexes are not easily determined.

Both species live for the first two or three years of their lives almost exclusively in the water. Tortoises breath air and need to be able to reach the surface easily.

HOUSING

Indoor

Aquariums are ideal for housing tortoises when small. Water should be changed frequently and be kept at a constant room temperature of 22°C and not more than 30°C. This can be achieved during winter with an aquarium heater with an adjustable thermostat. Remove the animal before re-filling the tank to allow the water to reach room temperature as extremes in water temperature may cause respiratory problems to the tortoise. In summer ensure that the container is not exposed to a window receiving direct sunlight.

A platform or ramp is necessary to enable the tortoise to crawl out occasionally as sunlight assists with its bone formation.

Outdoor

Outdoor pools must have a fence, otherwise the tortoise may wander away or be attacked by other animals. A partial or full meshwire roof may be desirable also to keep predators away. A pond measuring approximately 2 metres long, 1 metre wide and 40 cm deep, located in a summer shaded location with ramps would be ideal, as reptiles need external sources of heat. The pond should be cleaned regularly to prevent fowling or algae and droppings to accumulate. All containers need a layer of clean fine sand or clay, as direct contact with hard surfaces such as concrete will harm them.

HIBERNATION

During winter, tortoises kept outside may hibernate, either in the pool or outside it, provided there is enough cover, such as dead leaves or a leafy bush to hide. The tortoise should be left alone during this period and not be handled. It will be sluggish and may not accept food.

Tortoises housed indoor will not hibernate if the water temperature is kept at a moderate constant temperature, this will also cause them to grow more quickly than if hibernation occurs. When the room temperature (and water temperature) is allowed to fall in winter, the tortoise will become lethargic and them hibernate. When this occurs they should not be disturbed or fed.

Being reptiles, freshwater tortoises periodically shed the outer skin, (sloughing) which is done in order to grow. This is not undertaken at any fixed time of the year.

FEEDING

Freshwater tortoises feed only under water, they may not take food if the water temperature is too cold. Foods eaten include; raw lean meat, such as beef heart, liver, water snails, tadpoles, worms and insects. Other suitable foods include pieces of fish, yabbies and shrimps. The meat can be chopped finely.

Baby tortoises can initially be encouraged to feed by dangling tiny pieces on the end of a fine piece of wire as the movement stimulates them to eat more readily.

A mature tortoise (larger than 10cm) will eat

about a dozen pieces of lean meat about 1cm cubed every second day. Be careful not to overfeed the tortoise. **DO NOT FEED PREPARED MINCE MEAT.** (This may contain preservatives and can be very high in fat content).

The intake of calcium is an essential dietary commodity to prevent the tortoise's shell from getting soft. This can either be supplied by placing a calcium block or pieces of cuttlefish in the container or mixing calcium powder with the food periodically.

AILMENTS

Tortoises when young, may sometimes develop ailments which if not quickly attended to, may lead to death. Factors which contribute to ailing tortoises may be caused by bacterial infections or improper feeding or housing conditions.

Some problems may arise with your tortoise are listed below. It may be useful to check if your local Veterinarian is familiar with tortoise ailments should there be a need.

Symptoms	Cause	Treatment
Swelling around eyes.	Dirty water. Fluctuation in water temperature.	Keep out of water for 24 hours.
Soft distorted shell.	Deficiency of calcium. Lack of sunlight.	Insert additional calcium to raw meats. Increase lighting either naturally or with artificial gro lux lights.
Fungus patches around claw, or white or grey fungus on body.	Dirty water. Too many tortoises kept together, may nip at feet causing infections.	Clean the enclosure more often. Separate tortoises or place in a larger enclosure.
Cracked Shell, Shell infections, Skin sores.	Water temperature too high. Animal handled roughly.	Adjust water temperature Handle animal less often. Consult Veterinary surgeon.

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