



## General turtle care and health checks

### Introduction

Turtles make fascinating pets but are a lifelong and intensive commitment. Caring for a pet turtle is complex and requires a great deal of maintenance. Most species of turtles that are kept in Australia will grow to a shell length of about 20 – 35cm and will require a very large aquarium or pond. Turtles can live over 100 years of age if cared for correctly. A Recreational Wildlife Licence is required to keep turtles. This can be sourced from the Environmental Protection Agency ([www.epa.qld.gov.au](http://www.epa.qld.gov.au)).

### Enclosures

Turtles can be kept in aquariums or outdoor ponds. Young turtles should be kept in aquariums initially, until they are more mature. Because turtles do not generate heat internally, they rely on the use of external heat to maintain their bodies at a thermal optimum. Water quality is also very important, as poor water quality can easily lead to disease. These factors make correct husbandry crucial.

Please refer to the handout 'Keeping turtles in aquariums' and 'Water quality and the Nitrogen Cycle' for more information.

Turtles need to be in water to eat, drink and defaecate.

### Transportation

Never transport your turtle in water as there is a risk of drowning. A bucket or container lined with moist towels is sufficient.

### Weight

It is beneficial to keep regular records of your turtle's weight. Most turtles can be weighed on digital kitchen scales. These should be used specifically for the turtle and not in the kitchen. See the *Salmonella and Reptiles* care sheet for more information. If weight loss or a lack of weight gain is noted, then a health check should be arranged.

### Hibernation/brumation

There is no need to hibernate/brumate a pet turtle. More often than not this leads to disease when done accidentally or by people without experience. Water and basking areas should be maintained at the correct temperature throughout the year.

### Health checks

To ensure that your turtle is healthy, a health check should be performed by a veterinarian. Regular examinations, once or twice a year, should be performed from then on. This is important because symptoms of disease in turtles can be very subtle. During a health check consultation, we aim to do a number of different things. These include:

- A thorough physical examination
- Discussion of husbandry
- Weight check
- Dietary assessment
- Discussion and planning of further testing

### Further testing includes the following:

#### Water quality testing

This is highly recommended for all new patients as it assesses the general health of the environment in which your turtle is living.

- Bring about 50mL of water from the aquarium / pond
- Do not clean the aquarium / pond prior to collecting the sample

#### Microscopic examination of faeces

Aim to bring a faecal sample in a sealed container. This can be collected from the tank / pond. Alternatively try feeding your turtle in a container of tank water in the hope that they will also defaecate in this time.

- A wet smear will reveal worm eggs, flagellate infections and give an estimate of bacterial numbers. This is a normal part of consultations, and is free of charge.
- A faecal floatation is a more accurate way of determining worm burdens.

#### General blood testing

- **Haematology** is the examination of the red and white cells present in a turtle's blood. This will show anaemia, identify subclinical illness, and demonstrate chronic diseases; often before the turtle itself looks sick.
- **Biochemical testing** is done if any abnormalities are detected in the haematological or physical examination, in older turtles or in turtles on chronic medication. Biochemical testing assesses the function of, and any damage to, internal organs including the liver, kidneys and pancreas.

