

# RESPIRATORY DISEASES IN IGUANAS

Respiratory illnesses are not uncommonly seen in captive iguanas in Maryland. There are a variety of causes. Iguanas with respiratory disease should not just be treated with medications, but also a search should be done to try and determine why respiratory disease is present. Failure to address the underlying causes dooms the treatment to failure. Death rates from respiratory disease is up to 40% in snakes and lizards.<sup>1</sup>

Clinical signs of respiratory illness include open mouth breathing, excess mucous in mouth, increased respiratory effort, poor weight gain, failure to thrive, decreased appetite, anorexia, increased lethargy and death. Diagnosis is based on clinical signs and laboratory work-ups, radiographs, and cultures. Many people take oral cultures which are for the most part useless unless lesions are present. The bacteria cultured from the mouth may or may not be the same as in the lungs. Cultures should be done from sterile trachea washes or directly from the trachea (glottis) with a culture.<sup>1</sup>

Treatment is to correct the underlying problems and start on a broad spectrum antibiotic. It should be assumed that the infections are mixed-aerobic and anaerobic bacteria<sup>2</sup> since over 50% of the cultures show both types of bacteria. For maximum coverage an aminoglycoside with a cephalosporin and metronidazole or penicillin should be used.<sup>1,2</sup> In severe infections, the cephalosporin can be diluted and given intra-tracheal. Dilute 1 part cefotaxime (100 mg/ml) to 3 parts sterile saline or LRS. Vitamin A and vitamin C by injection seems to help recovery. Sick animals should be kept hydrated and isolated from other individuals. Warm soaks daily and increasing environmental temperature to the high 90s-100s°F (ensure adequate hydration) seem to speed recovery.

Enrofloxacin is a good broad spectrum antibiotic with a wider margin of safety. Resistance is sometimes seen and it does not hit anaerobes.

1. **Hilf, M, Wagner R, Yu W-** A prospective Study of Upper Airway Flora in Healthy Boid Snakes and Snakes With Pneumonia. *J. Zoo Wildlife Med.* 21(3), 318-325, 1990.
2. **Stewart, JS:** Anaerobic Bacterial Infections in Reptiles. *J. Zoo Wildlife Med.* 21(2), 180-184, 1990.

*From Feathers, Scales & Tails Veterinary Hospital, 330 One Forty Village Rd., Westminster, MD 21157, 410-876-0244.*



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Very orange Green iguana, male. Photograph: Thomas Wiewandt