

MUSK TURTLE CARE

The Common Musk turtle is a highly aquatic freshwater turtle, originating from North America where it can be found anywhere from South Canada to Florida. It is also known as the “Stinkpot” due to its ability to emit malodorous musk especially when frightened. These turtles prefer slow moving or still water and generally forage at night along the river bed, intermittently extending their necks up to the surface to catch food or take in air. Other musk turtle species include the Razor-backed, the Flattened and the Loggerhead musk turtles, and similar care is required for all these species.

HOUSING

- Musk turtles should be housed in an enclosure which is easy to clean, insulate and keep secure. They should have access to both a land area where they can rest and bask, and a water area where they can swim. Musk turtles spend most of their time in the water, so ideally the enclosure should be designed to include a shallow area where they can stand in the water but stretch their head up above the surface to breathe. A combination of real and plastic plants will also provide hiding places, and add interest to a turtle’s environment.
- The water area should have a gentle slope providing easy access, be of a reasonable depth, with a decent filtration system being an essential requirement. The aim of the filter is to ensure good water circulation and a high standard of water quality, as dirty stagnant water poses a health risk both to turtles and to humans. It is worth bearing in mind that the waste produced by turtles is much more than most filter units intended for aquariums can handle, and a powerful filter may be required for larger turtles. External canister filters are usually the most effective for adult turtles, drastically reducing the need for frequent water changes, although internal canister filters can work well for small hatchlings.
- Water quality is important and should be checked initially every few weeks with a test kit when the tank is set up, to ensure the water is free from toxic chemicals and at the correct pH. Water conditioning treatments may also be necessary to neutralise any toxic chemicals in the water.
- Maintenance of the filter system is the most important way to maintain good hygiene and the filter will need cleaning regularly, but even with a filter system, regular water changes will be necessary. The land area of the tank should also be cleaned out at least weekly and a suitable disinfectant used.

TEMPERATURES AND HUMIDITY

- Reptiles depend on external heat sources to regulate their body temperature, so supplementary heating is required to create a temperature range (**see separate handout on heating for reptiles**).
- A basking area is created using a spot bulb, providing a basking temperature of 32°C. This should be kept on all day. The water temperature should be maintained at 24-26°C, with temperatures no lower than 20°C overnight. There are several types of heat sources available, with an underwater heater being the most effective at providing background heat. Underwater heaters however, are generally designed for fish, so can be easily destroyed and dangerous to large boisterous turtles, and only the sturdiest varieties should be used. The temperatures should be measured with a maximum/minimum thermometer. During the cold winter months

careful checking is required to ensure that the heat sources are keeping the tank sufficiently warm. Heat sources should be guarded or kept at a height to prevent thermal burns.

LIGHTING

- Turtles need daily exposure to full spectrum lighting (including UV-b light).
- Various UV lamps are available (**see separate handout on lighting for reptiles**), but for tortoises a lamp with a high output (e.g. 10-12%) should be used to mimic the strong sunlight of their wild environment.
- Lamps should be kept on for ~ 12 hours per day and at an appropriate distance from the turtle as recommended by the manufacturer.
- All lamps should be changed at least as frequently as manufacturer's instructions or checked regularly for their UV output.

WHAT TO FEED

- Musk turtles are omnivorous, but more carnivorous than many turtle species, and eat a variety of invertebrates, fish and plant matter. In captivity therefore, animal matter should make up 70-80% of the diet, with the remaining 20-30% being green leafy vegetables or aquatic plants.
- Animal matter may include rehydrated low fat dried cat, dog or trout pellets, raw pre-killed small fish, bloodworms, earthworms, and good quality proprietary foods. Fresh food should be provided daily to juveniles, and every 2-3 days to adults, ideally no more than can be consumed in 30-40 minutes. Feeding in a separate tank will help keep the water clean, but frequent handling may stress some turtles, so may not be appropriate in every case (see separate **Terrapin feeding guide** for more information).
- Supplementation is important in captivity as diets can often become deficient in vitamins and minerals. We recommend alternating a calcium supplement (e.g. Calcidust) and a combined vitamin/mineral supplement (e.g. Nutrobal). Unfortunately in water, supplement quickly washes off so should ideally be dusted on those food items which are always consumed immediately.

COMPANIONS

- Turtles do not appear to benefit from the company of others, although animals can be maintained in single-sex groups if space allows. Care should be taken to ensure multiple basking spots and feeding stations are provided if more than one individual is kept together.

SALMONELLA

- All reptiles can potentially carry Salmonella but it is rarely a cause of illness in turtles.
- It can be transmitted to people and good hygiene after handling the reptile is important. Generally washing your hands in soap or a commercially available disinfectant is sufficient.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

We recommend annual health checks every year for pet reptiles as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.