

Cryptosporidium and Reptiles

Understanding Cryptosporidium and Your Reptile

When it comes to caring for your reptile, being aware of potential health issues is crucial, and one that often flies under the radar is **Cryptosporidium**. This microscopic, single-celled parasite can make its home in the intestines of your pet, leading to some serious health complications.



What Is Cryptosporidium?

Cryptosporidium, often shortened to “crypto,” consists of a couple of species that primarily affect reptiles. You’ll typically find **C. serpentis** in snakes and **C. saurophilum** in lizards. Snakes, in particular, are at higher risk of crypto infections, as the parasite targets the stomach lining, leading to dangerous bleeding and, unfortunately, can sometimes be fatal. For lizards, the impact is more on the intestines, which results in a poor absorption of nutrients and various health issues.

One concerning aspect of Cryptosporidium is that it can complete its entire lifecycle within a single reptile. This means that your pet can easily re-infect itself, allowing the parasite levels to rise rapidly, even in small collections.



How Do Reptiles Contract Cryptosporidium?

There are a few ways your reptile can pick up this pesky parasite:

1. **Direct contact:** If they come into contact with faecal matter from an infected reptile.
2. **Contaminated equipment:** This includes food and water bowls, as well as your own hands.
3. **Self-infection:** Your reptile can also reinfect itself, which exacerbates the problem.

Recognising the Signs of Cryptosporidium

Spotting a Cryptosporidium infection in reptiles can be tricky, particularly with lizards, as the symptoms can be pretty generalised. Many reptiles may not show any symptoms at all, but if they do become symptomatic, it's often during times of stress or illness.

Here are some signs to watch out for:

- Loss of appetite or regurgitation of food
- Changes in faeces, possibly leading to diarrhoea
- Unexplained weight loss
- Low energy levels
- In severe cases, it can lead to death

If you notice any of these signs in your pet, it's essential to make an appointment with your local exotic vet as soon as possible.



What to Do If You Suspect Cryptosporidium

If you think your reptile might have a Cryptosporidium infection, your first step should be visiting the vet. They'll conduct a thorough physical examination to check your pet from nose to tail since diarrhoea can stem from various issues.

Diagnosing Cryptosporidium can be particularly challenging. Traditional faecal tests often miss it, so more advanced tests looking for the parasite's DNA may be required. However, these tests can yield false negatives since Cryptosporidium might not always be present in the faeces. Unfortunately, the only definitive diagnosis usually comes post-mortem, which is far from ideal.

Health Risks to You

The species of Cryptosporidium that affect reptiles typically don't pose a risk to humans. However, keep in mind that **C. parvum**, which does infect humans, can be found in mice and rats. If you're feeding these to your reptile, it's wise to exercise caution.

If you suspect you've been exposed to *Cryptosporidium*, don't hesitate to reach out to



your doctor for advice.

Preventing *Cryptosporidium*

While you can't completely shield your reptile from *Cryptosporidium*, there are steps you can take to reduce the risk:

- **Quarantine New Reptiles:** Especially important if you have multiple reptiles. Isolate new additions for at least 90 days to monitor their health before introducing them to your existing collection. During this time, getting a faecal sample tested can provide useful insights into their health.
- **Choose Wisely:** When acquiring a new reptile, try to obtain it from a reliable source to minimise the chances of introducing an already infected pet into your home.
- **Cleanliness Is Key:** While *Cryptosporidium* can be tough to eradicate, maintaining rigorous cleaning routines will significantly reduce its presence. This includes disinfecting all equipment and surfaces.
- **Keep Things Separate:** Use distinct food and water bowls for each reptile and avoid swapping them between enclosures without thorough cleaning.
- **Stress Management:** Many reptiles can carry dormant *Cryptosporidium*, which might flare up during stressful times. Keeping your pet's environment calm and ensuring they're happy can help prevent outbreaks.
- **Humane Euthanasia:** This is a difficult subject, but since *Cryptosporidium* cannot be effectively treated, it might be necessary to remove affected reptiles from larger collections. This can be a humane option when they're seriously ill.

- **Stay Vigilant:** If you notice your reptile has diarrhoea, make an appointment with your vet. There are many potential causes for diarrhoea, and identifying the root cause is crucial for effective treatment.



By being proactive and observant, you can help ensure your reptile stays healthy and happy, reducing the risks associated with *Cryptosporidium* and other potential health issues.