

Mites and Reptiles

Can Reptiles Get Mites?

You might be surprised to learn that there are over 250 different species of mites that can affect our scaly friends! Luckily, most of these tiny critters are quite rare in the UK. Mites are often spider-like and can be as small as 0.1mm, making them hard to spot. Interestingly, many mites aren't even harmful—they're free-living and play a vital role in breaking down organic matter in our environment. However, when it comes to reptiles, it's the parasitic mites we need to keep an eye on.

Living in captivity can be a double-edged sword for reptiles regarding parasites. On one hand, clean environments and limited exposure to new animals can help keep parasitic infections at bay. But if a captive reptile does get infected, the close quarters can allow those pesky parasites to multiply quickly, leading to serious health issues. Some researchers even suggest that mites might help transmit other illnesses, like roundworms or aeromonas, which can cause mouth rot. In snakes, particularly pythons and boas, snake mites are thought to spread Inclusion Body Disease (IBD), which can be fatal. So, knowing the signs of mite infestations can really help you keep your reptile healthy and happy!



What Are Reptile Mites?

The most common culprits when it comes to reptile mites in the UK are known as Ophionyssus mites. The snake mite, scientifically called *O. natricis*, often infests snakes but can sometimes be found on lizards too. On the flip side, the lizard mite, *O. acertinus*, is typically found on lizards but can occasionally hitch a ride on snakes. Reptiles with larger, overlapping scales—like carpet pythons and skinks—are especially susceptible to these bloodsuckers.

What makes these mites tricky is that they spend most of their lives off their hosts, making them hard to spot. To make matters worse, female lizard and snake mites don't even need males to reproduce, so just one little mite can quickly become a big

problem. Plus, they're known to travel several meters, which means they can easily move between different enclosures if you have multiple reptiles at home.

What Are the Signs of a Reptile Mite Infection?

Identifying mite infestations can be a bit of a challenge, especially since the larval stages are small and pale. However, adult mites can sometimes be spotted as tiny black dots. They love to hide under scales, but you can often find them in softer areas of your reptile's body.



For lizards, keep an eye out for mites in these areas:

- Corners of the mouth
- Around the nostrils
- Near the eyes and ear holes
- Around the vent

As for snakes, you might find them:

- Under the skin fold beneath the chin
- Around the nostrils and eyes
- Near the vent

- Under the scales on the belly
- In the heat pits along the lower jaw

Other signs that your reptile might be dealing with a mite infestation include:

- **Mite Dust:** You might notice little white specks floating on the surface of the water after a bath—this could be mite droppings.
- **Skin and Scale Health:** Look for any crusts, bleeding, or other signs of poor skin condition.
- **Change in Activity:** If your reptile seems unusually lethargic or overly agitated, it might be a sign of discomfort.
- **Loss of Appetite:** If your reptile isn't eating well, that's a red flag for overall health issues.
- **Rubbing and Scratching:** If your pet is frequently scratching against their enclosure, they could be feeling itchy.
- **Bathing Behaviour:** Itchy reptiles often seek relief by sitting in water.
- **Shedding Issues:** If shedding seems off, it could indicate skin problems related to mites.

If you notice any of these signs, it's a good idea to make an appointment with your



local vet right away!

How Can I Prevent My Reptile from Getting Mites?

While reptiles can indeed get mites, healthy ones living in a clean environment aren't typically at high risk. Because of this, most reptiles don't need routine mite

treatments. However, there are some simple steps you can take to help protect your pet:

- **Monitoring:** Keep an eye on any changes in your reptile's scales or behavior. If something seems off, a vet visit is a must!
- **Handling:** Regular interaction can help you spot any changes in your reptile's skin early on, allowing for swift treatment if needed.
- **Choosing Substrate:** Make sure to get substrate from reputable suppliers, as mites can hitch a ride on these materials and survive away from a host for some time.
- **Quarantine New Arrivals:** If you're bringing home a new reptile, consider keeping it in quarantine for a while to ensure you're not introducing any unwanted guests!

What Should I Do If I Think My Reptile Has Mites?

If you suspect that your reptile might have a mite problem, your best course of action is to take them to the vet. A thorough physical examination can help determine if mites are indeed present. If so, your vet will prescribe a treatment plan tailored to your pet, which might include:

- **Anti-Parasitic Medications:** These should always be used cautiously, as some common treatments, like ivermectin, can be deadly for certain species, such as turtles and tortoises.
- **Warm Baths:** Many mites will perish if submerged, but keep in mind that this method doesn't work for those hiding on the head. Never leave your reptile unattended while they're soaking!
- **Cleaning Their Environment:** It's crucial to clean your reptile's habitat thoroughly; otherwise, they could easily get reinfested.
- **Discussing Care Practices:** Your vet might also talk about how you're keeping your reptile to help reduce the chances of future problems.

If there's any uncertainty regarding the diagnosis, your vet may recommend skin tests to look for mites, which can often be nearly invisible to the naked eye.



What About My Health?

While many mites have a preference for specific species, some can also infect humans if you come into close contact. Snake mites, in particular, don't typically affect people, but there has been at least one report of skin irritation resulting from exposure to *Ophionyssus*. If you suspect you might have come into contact with mites and are concerned, it's best to reach out to your doctor for advice.