

Ticks and Reptiles

Did you know that having scales isn't always a foolproof shield against biting parasites? Enter ticks—those pesky, blood-sucking nuisances that can make life uncomfortable for your reptile!

What Are Ticks?

Ticks are small but mighty creatures, equipped with powerful jaws that can pierce through even the toughest reptile skin. They latch onto pets (and us humans!) to feast on blood. These tiny parasites typically hang out on grass and plants, waiting for a host to wander by. When they attach, they start off small, but they can quickly swell up as they gorge themselves, often changing from a brown hue to a pearly grey. In the UK, we have several common tick species that can bite reptiles, including a specific tortoise tick that, while not native, has made its way here!



Where Might Your Reptile Pick Up a Tick?

Ticks can be found just about anywhere, but they love damp, humid environments like long grass and woodland areas. Thankfully, most of our pet reptiles stay far away from such habitats. Indoor reptiles are generally at a very low risk of tick bites, but they can still be affected if a family pet—like a dog or cat—brings ticks inside. Tortoises, on the other hand, might pick up ticks while munching on grass during outdoor outings. With the warm and wet winters we've been experiencing in the UK, we're seeing more ticks than ever. However, our most common UK ticks need a humidity of at least 80% to survive off a host, which means they usually don't last long in our homes. This greatly reduces the risk of your reptiles getting bitten.

What Are the Risks of Tick Bites?

While ticks can be a real nuisance, they can also cause health issues for your reptile, including anaemia in severe cases (though this is quite rare). Additionally, ticks can carry nasty diseases that can be transmitted to humans, so it's crucial to remove any ticks carefully. Always wear gloves if you can!

How Can You Check Your Reptile for Ticks?



Thanks to their smooth, scaly bodies, spotting ticks on your reptile should be relatively straightforward—especially after the tick has feasted! A fully engorged tick can grow to almost a centimetre in length, making it hard to miss, unless it's hiding in a tricky spot. Ticks tend to latch on in areas with thinner scales where they're less likely to be brushed off, like behind the legs or around the nostrils, eyes, and vent.

Regular handling is key; this not only strengthens your bond with your reptile but also gives you a chance to conduct a thorough check. Feel for any lumps or skin changes, as ticks can be identified by their tiny legs sticking out at the skin level. If you spot any unusual lumps, don't hesitate to consult your vet—better safe than sorry!



How Can You Safely Remove a Tick?

If you do discover a tick, resist the urge to yank it off. Tick mouthparts can burrow deep into the skin, and pulling it out incorrectly can leave bits behind, leading to potential infections. Plus, squishing the tick's body while it's still attached could push blood back into your reptile, raising the risk of infection.

The best way to remove a tick is with a pair of tweezers. Make sure to grab the tick as close to the skin as possible and pull steadily and firmly—no twisting! If you're unsure or uncomfortable with the process, it's best to take your reptile to the vet for help.

How Can You Protect Your Reptile from Ticks?

Fortunately, the chances of your reptile picking up ticks are pretty low, so you don't need to worry too much ahead of time. However, keeping your other pets—especially dogs—protected during tick season (spring to autumn) can help reduce the risk of ticks being brought into your home. Just a heads-up: some tick treatments for other pets may contain ivermectin, which is toxic to tortoises, so always consult your exotic vet



before starting any treatments.

What About Your Health?

Ticks can carry diseases like Lyme disease, which can affect people, but they can only be transmitted through tick bites—not directly from your reptile. However, finding ticks on your pet means you might also be at risk, so it's a good idea to check yourself for ticks after handling your reptile. Remember, ticks can be tiny—just 2-3mm when they first attach! If you do find one on yourself, it's best to remove it promptly, ideally within 24 hours, to minimise the risk of disease transmission. Any new lumps or bumps should be checked out by your doctor, and if you notice a “bull’s-eye” red ring on your skin, that could be a sign of Lyme disease, so definitely get that looked at right away!