

Managing wounds in reptiles

Causes of wounds in reptiles

Wounds in reptiles can have many causes, from burns due to incorrect positioning or strength of heat lamps, to bites from companions and tail injury due to accidental self-trauma¹. In chelonians that are allowed to roam in the garden there is also the risk of injury from predators or gardening tools.



Educating clients on the importance of the correct housing light and heating source, diet and general husbandry for their species of pet is key to reducing the incidence of injuries. If a member of your practice has interest and expertise with reptiles, it might be worth offering consults or information evenings to help cover some of these useful topics with clients.

Problematic wound healing

Some of the difficulties relating to wound healing in reptiles, compared with mammals, are due to the physiological and anatomical differences. Reptiles have a lower and more variable body temperature and metabolism, and their skin is less well supplied by the vascular system. This makes wound closure in reptiles significantly slower and more dependent on the temperature of their environment.



Reptile skin is also dry with a heavily cornified Stratum corneum², and is considerably less flexible than mammalian skin, meaning that surgical closure of wounds is more problematic³. Additionally, wound closure in reptiles is not generally recommended because reptile pus is extremely caseous and does not drain well, so there is a greater risk of wound breakdown and infection or abscess formation⁴.

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How to approach reptile wounds⁵

1. **Pain relief** – All patients should receive analgesia as pain in reptiles can be very difficult to assess and wounds are likely to be causing significant discomfort.
2. **Check for infection** – Depending on the case presentation, taking swabs for culture and sensitivity provides useful information for treating possible infection.
3. **Treat as an open wound** – To decrease the risk of infection, allow the wounds to heal by second intention.
4. **Clean the wound** – Recent wounds that are in the inflammatory phase of healing should be cleaned with copious lavage. Necrotic tissue may need to be debrided at this stage, or at subsequent vet check-ups depending on the progression of healing.
5. **Dress the wound** – A dressing will provide initial protection. These should be changed regularly while the wound is still in the inflammatory phase of healing.
6. **Keep the wound moist** – When the wound is starting to move to the granulation phase, keeping the wound moist can help promote the formation of granulation tissue. Hydrocolloid gels and dressings, or a product such as Omnimatrix – which is suitable for all stages of wound healing – can be used.
7. **Consider UV light** – Advising on the correct levels of UV light for a particular species can help to increase the rate of wound healing.
8. **Diet** – Ensuring the correct levels of protein, vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin A and calcium, are important for helping the skin and carapace to heal.



References:

- 1 <https://www.msdtvetmanual.com/exotic-and-laboratory-animals/reptiles/environmental-diseases-and-traumatic-injuries-of-reptiles>
- 2 <https://www.bioscience.com.pk/topics/zoology/item/758-comparative-anatomy-integument-in-reptiles-birds-and-mammals>
- 3 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1557506311000607>
- 4 <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=19239&id=9003821>
- 5 <https://veterinary-practice.com/article/wound-management-in-chelonians>

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