

## To Hibernate or Not to Hibernate... That is the Question!

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**Q: Is it normal for my reptile to become inactive and not eat during the winter? Does it mean that he needs to hibernate?**

**A: Think twice before letting your reptile hibernate. Many species shouldn't hibernate at all, and unhealthy reptiles should never be allowed to hibernate.**

Hibernation means to spend the winter in a dormant state. Wild reptiles that live in temperate regions where winter occurs use hibernation as a way to survive the cold winter months when food and warmth are unavailable. Tropical reptiles, such as iguanas, ball pythons and boa constrictors, have no need to hibernate and thus do not.

Hibernation is risky business. The risk is worth it for wild reptiles facing a long winter because they have no other options. For pet reptiles, however, other options exist. Certainly reptiles that don't hibernate in the wild should never be hibernated in captivity. Reptiles that do hibernate in the wild generally do not need to hibernate in captivity unless they are being used for breeding purposes.

Here are some important facts about hibernation in reptiles:

- Unhealthy reptiles should never be allowed to hibernate. Reptiles' immune systems don't work well in cold temperatures, and the animal will inevitably become more ill during hibernation and may even die.
- Make sure that your pet's enclosure has the recommended temperatures and photoperiod despite weather fluctuations outside. It is not uncommon for reptiles to become lethargic in the winter because cage temperatures and/or day length have inadvertently dropped.
- Some decrease in appetite and energy levels can be normal in the winter, even if your reptile is kept warm. However, reptiles shouldn't lose more than 10% of their body weight during this time. Invest in a kitchen or gram scale, and monitor your pet's weight. If your pet loses more than the recommended amount of weight, it is time for a visit to a reptile veterinarian.
- If you do plan to hibernate your reptile, schedule a veterinary exam beforehand in the early fall. A physical examination, complete blood count, and chemistry panel should be done to make sure that your pet is healthy enough to hibernate. Then, talk with your veterinarian about how to properly hibernate your reptile pet, as each reptile species has different hibernation requirements.