

ANIMAL EMERGENCY CENTER

2100 W. Silver Spring Drive

Glendale, WI 53209

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www.animalemergencycenter.com

at the heart of critical care

Care of Leopard Geckos

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Natural History: Leopard geckos, *Eublepharus macularius*, are found in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northwestern India. They live on the ground in dry to semi-arid habitats where temperatures fluctuate greatly between day and night. They are active at night or during the twilight hours, but will occasionally bask in sunlight.

Special Characteristics

Longevity: In captivity, leopard geckos have been known to live over 20 years with proper care. They become sexually mature between 16 and 24 months, but may not be ready to breed until their third year.

Size: Hatchlings are about 3 inches long, and adults can reach 12 inches total length.

Temperament: Leopard geckos make wonderful pets. They are generally very docile, and can learn to accept handling. They rarely bite, and tend to move slowly once acclimated to their surroundings. They tend to hide during daylight hours.

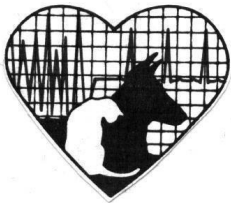
Anatomy: Leopard geckos have eyelids that can blink. They have toenails, and cannot climb glass.

Captive Care Requirements:

Lighting: Although they rarely bask, ultraviolet B (UVB) is required to maintain healthy leopard geckos. The best source of UVB is the sun, but a special light can be purchased from a reptile shop. Acceptable options include fluorescent reptile tubes and mercury vapor bulbs. Fluorescent tubes must be placed no more than 12 inches from the basking site, and should be replaced every 6-12 months because even though visible light is emitted, the UVB fades. All lighting must be on a timer to provide about 14 hours of daylight and 10 hours of darkness. Incandescent light bulbs with a tungsten filament (even those with Neodymium and sold as "full spectrum") will provide heat, but **not** UVB.

Temperature: The daytime temperature of the tank should be between 80-86°F with a basking spot of 88-90°F. A heat lamp should be placed over one end of the tank, providing a temperature gradient with one side of the tank warmer than the other. Select the wattage of the bulb to provide the proper temperature within the tank. Under tank heaters are useful to gently raise the overall temperature of the tank, but should be used with a thermostat or rheostat to accommodate changing ambient temperatures. At night, the temperature should drop to 70-75°F. When room temperatures are below 68°F at night, use an under tank heater or a red (infrared) bulb. Obviously, at least **two thermometers** must be in use to monitor these temperatures, and care must be taken to prevent burns to the lizard. Heating elements can be dangerous if not used properly, and a smoke alarm is recommended.

Humidity: Good ventilation is essential, and the humidity should be moderate (40-60%) for healthy skin shedding to occur. Low humidity will cause improper shedding (dysecdysis), which can lead to dead toes that fall off. Locally humid spots can be created by misting under the hiding area several times a week, or by placing damp vermiculite within a container placed inside an oversized shelter (humidity box).



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- Water:** Provide a water dish that is large enough for the whole gecko to soak its body. Lizards often defecate in their water, so it must be replaced daily and the dish disinfected at least once a week.
- Enclosure:** A 20 gallon aquarium will be adequate for keeping up to a trio (one male and two female) of leopard geckos if several hiding shelters are available.
- Substrate:** The bottom of the enclosure should be covered with something safe and easy to clean. Since leopard geckos will eat bedding made of small particles, do not use them. Never use sand, wood chips, mulch, or gravel. Good choices include newspaper, indoor/outdoor carpet, or, if routine disposal is possible, peat moss/potting soil. Although many sources claim that sand is a safe substrate, it has been found impacted within the stomach and intestines of leopard geckos after death.
- Cage furniture:** Provide low branches to climb, natural rocks to bask upon, and shelter to hide in. Ideally a rock will be placed under the heat lamp that is above the under-tank heater. Hardy plants like *Sansevieria spp.* (snake plants), *Hawarathia spp.* (e.g., aristocrat plant), small palms, and figs may be used. Do not simply stack rocks upon each other to form a shelter, they are bound to crash and injure the lizard.
- Feeding:** Leopard geckos require a somewhat varied diet. They are mainly insectivorous, but will eat small rodents. Crickets and mealworms are widely available and can be "gut-loaded" using T-Rex Calcium Plus Cricket Diet. Do not use gelatin-based calcium and water cubes. Provide insects with fresh water that is shallow enough to prevent drowning or use a sponge. Choose insects by size. Hatchling leopard geckos eat two-three week old crickets, and adults will take six week old (full grown) crickets. Always "gut-load" insects by offering water, a high calcium cricket chow, and dark green or orange vegetables for at least 24 hours before feeding them to the lizard. Infant mice (pinkies) may be offered occasionally after the gecko reaches one year of age, and can be useful to help condition adults for breeding. Always feed lizards in a dish to prevent ingestion of substrate.
- Supplements:** Juvenile leopard geckos require calcium (without added phosphorus/vitamin D₃) supplementation three times a week, and a high quality reptile multivitamin once a week. These should be dusted on insects just before offering to the lizard. Non breeding adult leopard geckos will do well with weekly calcium and twice monthly multivitamin supplementation.

Grooming and Handling:

Although best thought of as display specimens, leopard geckos will learn to tolerate routine handling once they reach 6-8 months of age. When handled regularly, they will begin to move more slowly and will not struggle. Leopard gecko skin is very delicate, so care must be taken to prevent injuring the animal. Finally, because all reptiles are potentially infected with *Salmonella* bacteria, which can be transmitted from reptiles to humans, routine cleanliness and hygiene are essential.