

Basic Care of the Leopard Gecko (*Eublepharis macularius*)

by Pauline Smith



Introduction:

The information on this caresheet is the result of knowledge I have gained through reading other care sheets and books, discussions on various web forums, veterinary advice and my own experiences with leopard geckos. This information represents what I have personally found useful and interesting.

Suitability as Pets:

Leopard geckos are one of the easiest reptiles to care for. They are generally calm, fairly inactive, unable to climb walls, tolerant of handling, quiet and clean (choosing one place in their vivarium to use as a toilet area). Being nocturnal, they are most active in the evening (spending most of the day sleeping).

Description:

Leopard geckos are members of the subfamily Eublepharinae (which derives from the Latin *Eu* meaning good/true, and *blephar* meaning eyelid). The possession of a "true eyelid" distinguishes members of this subfamily from other geckos. The second part of the species name, *macularius*, derives from the Latin *macula* meaning spot or blemish, which is self-explanatory (although it might not be so obvious in the future given the popularity of newer colour morphs, particularly the hypo-morphs (the best of which have no spotting at all) and the patternless morph).

Origin:

Leopard geckos are native to dry, rocky habitat in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan.

Longevity and Size:

Leopard geckos can live for up to 20 years, reaching adult size (and sexual maturity) at 8 months to 1 year. They reach, on average, 8 inches in length (nose to tail tip) and weigh anything from 50-100g.



Selection:

Select one that looks healthy and is responsive when handled (babies should be flighty, adults may be more tolerant). Look not only at the gecko's general condition, but also at its living conditions (these will indicate how it has been cared for and

whether the conditions may have affected its health. Only select a gecko from a shop/breeder in which all animals are healthy and well cared for.

Healthy leopard geckos:

- should be alert when handled.
- tails should be full and plump (not dehydrated).
- bodies should be reasonably plump (bones should not be visible).
- stomachs should be rounded/full, but not distended (unless it is a gravid female) or showing signs of internal bleeding/bruising.
- skin should appear healthy ("sweating", open sores, blisters, discoloured areas, signs of infection and dehydrated looking skin are indicative of a problem) and without mites and/or ticks.
- eyes should be bright and clear (there should be no swelling, discharge or dried residue).

- mouths should be firm and clean without discharge.
- noses should be clean, dry and without discharge.
- limbs/jaw should be firm (not flexible/bendy- this could be indicative of metabolic bone disease).
- toes should be without unshed skin, bleeding, swelling or signs of infection.
- vent area should be clean and without prolapsed organs.
- faeces should be solid, black/brown, with whitish urate (diarrhea/odd coloured stools indicate a problem).

Housing Requirements

The enclosure should be set up before getting the gecko to ensure that an ideal environment can be achieved.

Important rules if keeping several leopard geckos:

Firstly, leopard geckos do not require company, most will tolerate tank mates, however, they do very well on their own.

Only one male per tank- males are territorial and will fight to the death.

Only similar sized geckos can be housed together- smaller geckos can get stressed/bullied or eaten.

Type / Size: A vivarium or aquarium tank is suitable, providing there is adequate ventilation. Being terrestrial the tank length is more important than its height. The minimum recommended size for 1 leopard gecko is 2ft (long) x 1.5 x 1.5 ft, this would also be suitable for a pair, however, 3ft would be more comfortable for 2.

Substrate: The only substrate that can be used without the risk of impaction is kitchen roll. A more natural look requires vigilance. Leopard gecko less than 6 inches in length are more at risk and should therefore be kept on kitchen roll. Commonly used substrates for adults include fine sand (such as reptisand) and childrens play sand. Substrates to avoid include corncob, bark, wood and crushed walnut.

Temperature: A temperature gradient is essential because geckos, like other reptiles, are unable to physiologically regulate their body temperature. Instead they will find a position in the tank that is at the temperature they require. Proper temperature is essential for digestion.

A temperature gradient can be achieved by placing an undertank heatmat (and protected basking light if necessary) at one end of the tank to create the warm end. The substrate temperature at the warm end of the tank should be approximately 88°F. Room temperature (around 70°F) should be sufficient for the rest of the tank. Hot rocks are not recommended they can over heat and cause burns. It is advisable to use any heat sources in combination with a thermostat to more-precisely regulate the temperature.

Light: UV lighting is not necessary for leopard geckos since they are nocturnal, proper supplementation of their food (see below) should be sufficient to provide the necessary minerals. A day/night cycle can be established using a normal bulb (these can be positioned outside of the tank pointing in) and have the added benefit that they heat the air slightly during the day, and being off at night, provide a night time drop in temperature. A consistent light/dark cycle can be achieved using a timer device.

Furniture: Hide boxes are where your gecko will most likely spend most of its time! Hides can be bought from pet shops or made from over-turned plant pot bases or halved coconut shells with entrance holes cut. Hides should be available at both ends of the tank. A moist hide (tupperware tub with moist moss, ecoearth or kitchen roll) should also be provided at the warm end to aid in skin shedding. Secured rocks, cork bark and fake plants look nice and give your gecko something to climb on.

Water: Tap water that has been left to sit for 24 hours prior to use (to let the chlorine evaporate) can be provided in a shallow water dish. The dish should be cleaned and water changed every other day.

Calcium dish: Access to a dish containing a small amount of calcium only powder may be beneficial- allowing the gecko to regulate its own intake of calcium.



Feeding

Food type: Crickets are a good staple diet. For variety, silkworms and occasional waxworms (as these are high in fat) can be offered. Most leopard geckos will not eat pre-prepared dried foods such as can-o-crickets. Food items should be no longer than the width of the gecko's head.

Adding nutrients: Supplementation of livefood is necessary to better match the nutritional content of the natural diet of the leopard gecko. In order to improve the nutritional content, crickets should be:
Gutloaded- The crickets should be fed for at least 24 hours prior to use. A high quality flaked fish food is suitable (alternatively a nutritionally complete dry diet, see www.thegeckospot.com, can be used).
Fruit/vegetables (e.g. carrot or apple) serve as a source of moisture (and additional vitamins) for the crickets. All cricket food should be changed daily to avoid mould growth.

Dusted- Immediately prior to use, add a pinch of vitamin/calcium powder to a sandwich bag and shake the crickets in that to coat them with powder. Use calcium and vitamin powder (such as Nutrobal) once or twice a week and calcium-only powder for all other feedings.

Amount: Babies/juveniles can be fed daily (consuming 5-20 crickets per feeding). Adults can be fed every other day (consuming from 2-10 crickets). Only add to the tank the amount of food that the gecko will eat.

Shedding

Leopard geckos shed their skin every three to four weeks. Before shedding the skin will look dull (it is important to check that the moist hide is moist during this time). The gecko will peel and eat the skin from its body (this should take no more than a few hours). Unshed skin (e.g. around the toes) can be removed by letting the gecko soak in a tub of shallow warm water, then using a damp cotton bud to rub the skin off.

Handling

Leopard geckos should be handled gently and never by the tail, they are easily broken off. The tails will grow back, however, are unlikely to look like the original.

Cleaning

Any debris, dead crickets and faeces should be removed from the tank on a daily basis. Folded kitchen roll can be placed in the toilet area and removed/replaced as soon as it is soiled.

Health

Leopard geckos are generally a very hardy species and if kept in optimal conditions health problems should be unlikely.



References / Suggested Reading: This caresheet is an outline at best. Why not buy one of these inexpensive books? (order from local bookseller, or online eg. Amazon.co.uk)

1. The Leopard Gecko Manual by Philippe Vosjoli, Brian Viets, Ron Tremper and Roger Klingenburg DVM. Advanced Vivarium Systems, revised 2001. ISBN: 1882770625
2. Leopard geckos, Identification, Care and Breeding by Ray Hunziker, TFH Publications 1994. ISBN 0-7938-0258-X

Websites: Useful advice can be obtained here (remember, if in doubt, it is best to consult a qualified reptile vet):

1. The author's website, The Gecko Spot: <http://thegeckospot.net/>
2. David Feldmar's website, Gecko Life: <http://www.herplife.co.uk/gecko/>
3. The Kingsnake Leopard Gecko Forum: <http://forums.kingsnake.com/forum.php?catid=50>

4. The Kingsnake Gecko Forum: <http://forums.kingsnake.com/forum.php?catid=48>
5. The Kingsnake Herp Health Discussion: <http://forums.kingsnake.com/forum.php?catid=11>

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This caresheet provides only basic care information for leopard geckos. For more detailed information see the comprehensive leopard gecko caresheet set on Pauline's own website:
<http://www.thegeckospot.net/leocareindex.html>