

Water Dragon (*Physignathus cocincinus*) Care Plan

Water Dragons are diurnal semi-aquatic arboreal lizards from Asia. They can grow up to 2-3 feet in length. In adult males the femoral pores are more pronounced and they have larger heads and crests on the back of the neck. Water Dragons can be kept in groups if the enclosure is big enough. All individuals must have space to bask, feed and escape from more dominant individuals.

Water dragons need large secure vivariums with branches for climbing. They are very active reptiles and can injure themselves if confined within an inappropriately designed or constructed enclosure. Common sources of injury are from exposure to unprotected heat sources and through attempting to pass through the translucent walls of glass or plastic enclosures.

It is essential that vivarium temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure that this lizard is living in the correct environment for the species.

Lighting

Water dragons need ultraviolet B light for vitamin D synthesis and calcium metabolism. While this is best provided by access to natural sunlight, this is obviously not a practical option in Britain. Light sources such as *Iguana light*, *Reptisun*, *Sun-glo* or *Life-glo* lights are the best alternatives. They must be replaced regularly as their UVB output declines rapidly after 6-9 months.

Heating/ Temperature

Their preferred optimum temperature zone (POTZ) is 24-30°C. To stimulate appetite and digest their food, water dragons should have access to a basking area that remains at 30-32°C for 12 hours a day. The rest of the enclosure should have a temperature gradient from 30-32°C at the hot spot to 24°C at the coolest area during the day. Vivarium temperatures can drop by a few degrees at night time.

A temperature gradient can be achieved by placing a heat mat under or against the side of the vivarium at one end. Alternatively ceramic bulbs, spot lights or power plates can be used, although it is essential that heaters inside the vivarium are guarded to prevent direct contact by the animal. Some form of basking lamp will be necessary whichever other heating methods are used. Use a thermostat to control the heat system if possible. Hot rocks are not recommended.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Rocks or logs can be used to create hiding places or purpose built hide boxes can be used.

Provide branches to climb, rocks to bask upon, and shelter to hide in. Ideally a rock will be placed under the heat lamp. Hardy plants like sansevieria, aloe, palms, and cycads may be used.

Water /Humidity

Water dragons need a high level of humidity; around 80-90%. Fresh water should be provided daily in a container large enough to allow the lizard to completely submerge and the water dragon sprayed regularly with luke-warm water.

Diet / Feeding

Water dragons are omnivorous, eating a large proportion of insects. Crickets, mealworms, locusts, cockroaches and wax worms are all suitable.

Adults may take an occasional pinky or weaner mouse. A small amount of vegetable matter should also be offered with components well mixed and in bite-sized pieces. This should also be regularly dusted with Nutrobal (Vetark).

Suitable vegetables include dandelion (including flowers), watercress, mustard cress, parsley, kohlrabi, escarole, collard, turnip greens, endive, Chinese leaves, carrot tops, green beans, peas (and pods), mange-tout, bean sprouts, carrots, sweet potato, peppers, and sweetcorn. Vegetables should be shredded, grated or finely chopped and mixed thoroughly together.

Adults should be fed every 2-3 days; juveniles require feeding every 1-2 days with smaller prey items.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

In order to ensure that the diet has a correct calcium : phosphorus ratio, prey insects should be gut-loaded with a product such as Bug-Grub (Vetark) for 48 hours before feeding. They should also be regularly dusted with a high calcium product such as Nutrobal (Vetark) before feeding.

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Always wash your hands (preferably with an antiseptic soap) before or after handling any reptile. For animals in veterinary environment we advise the use of disposable gloves (to control RAS).

Quarantine new reptiles for at least 3 months. During this time record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour and have them examined by a vet.

It is a good idea to take along a fresh faecal sample so that the vet can check for the presence of gastrointestinal parasites.

Veterinary advice should be sought if your chameleon is not eating or producing faeces, is inactive, has swellings, particularly around the eyes, is losing weight or has a discharge from its eyes, nose or mouth.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.

Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.

Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.

Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immuno-compromised person in your home.

Don't kiss a reptile pet.