



## WAKING FROM HIBERNATION

There are no absolute rules as to the proper length of hibernation for captive tortoises and Box turtles. Generally speaking, indoor hibernation will occur between mid-October and late March. Small or young animals might hibernate for as long as eight to ten weeks, but six weeks may be adequate. Larger animals (mostly *Testudo* species) might spend as long as twelve to fourteen weeks in hibernation. Box turtles from the southern or south eastern United States may require as little as four to six weeks in hibernation. Some period of hibernation is almost certainly beneficial to your pet, and while animals should be woken at the first sign of concern, if a tortoise is doing well and losing no more than the expected amount of weight, there is no reason to end hibernation early. Make careful notes of weight loss. By the end of hibernation, a mature tortoise should not lose more than 6-7% of his pre-hibernation weight. Tortoises should be weighed and examined regularly during hibernation. See related articles for more details.

Once your tortoise starts to show sign of activity, once he has spent a reasonable time in hibernation, if there are any reasons to be concerned about his health or if his weight loss is approaching your limit of comfort, it is time to wake up!

After you remove your tortoise from his hibernaculum (den in which he has hibernated), keep him at room temperature for a few hours. This will mimic the time it would take him in the wild to emerge from his burrow, into bright, warm sunlight. Then move him to his normal enclosure, and maintain him within his POTZ (Preferred Optimal Temperature Zone – see related care articles for further information). Soak him daily for a week, and he should resume normal behavior and eating within three to four days. Use lukewarm water, which is only deep enough to reach his chin, or the bridge (where the plastron, or bottom shell meets the carapace, or top shell). The reptile should be soaked for 20-30 minutes daily. Soaking will encourage your pet to eliminate the wastes, which have been accumulating in his body during hibernation. The accumulation of wastes within the colon and bladder can lead to the release of toxins in to the animal's body, as well as to the inability to pass hard dry stool, and to the development of bladder stones and gout. Since many tortoises and turtles come from areas of the world where water is scarce, they will often not urinate until they know that a source of water is available. This is a method of water conservation. Misting (with a spray bottle) at least once a day will increase humidity levels in the enclosure, and by mimicking rainfall will encourage tortoises to eat, drink and evacuate waste.

Many tortoises, which do not eat within three to four days, are simply not warm enough, or are not exposed to sufficiently bright radiant light. A focal bright, "hot spot" is recommended. These conditions are necessary to stimulate the reptile to eat. In the wild your pet would emerge from a cool, dark burrow into bright sunlight, and quickly warm himself by basking in intense sunlight. A warm (generally not warmer than 20° C), bright room simply does not mimic the animal's natural environment.



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If your tortoise does not show any definite signs of illness and is behaving normally except that he is not eating, the first step is to review your husbandry techniques. In particular, pay attention to lighting (brightness and appropriate ultraviolet content – see related articles for more details on lighting recommendations), temperature, the presence of a focal “hot” spot (for basking) and photoperiod (recommended number of light and dark hours).

Failure to eat is probably the most common post-hibernation concern. If you cannot detect a problem in the tortoise's environment, if the animal shows any other signs of a health problem, or if he does not begin to eat within four to five days of correcting any husbandry problems, a visit to your reptile veterinarian is warranted. Conditions commonly associated with hibernation include frost damage to eyes and limbs, injury from predators (rodents, raccoons), sores or corneal ulcers from rough bedding, Pneumonia and excessive weight loss. The reptilian immune system does not function optimally at the temperatures required for hibernation. Reptiles hide illness very effectively, and many are sub-clinically (not obviously) ill when they begin hibernation. Disease may therefore have worsened during hibernation.

Any signs of illness, such as respiratory sounds, eye, nose or mouth discharge, failure to eat or abnormal behavior, wounds, sores warrant veterinary advice. See related articles for signs of a sick reptile.

If all is well, and your pet resumes normal eating and behavior patterns, the weeks following emergence from hibernation are a good time to schedule a well pet check up with your reptile veterinarian. He or she may detect reason for concern following a physical examination, or may be able to make suggestions regarding husbandry for the season to come. Worming or blood testing may also be appropriate at this time. Examination findings provide valuable information, especially when compared with those from previous years.