

HINGE-BACK TORTOISE CARE

The Hinge-Back tortoises (*Kinixys* species) originate from sub-Saharan Africa. Different species and subspecies have slightly different requirements, occupying a range of habitats, with some being more accustomed to savannah grasslands (such as the Bell's hinge-back) while others originate from forest regions (such as Schweigger's hinge-back), but the following care sheet provides a basic summary of their needs.

Hibernation is not recommended for Hinge-back tortoises or any other tropical species.

HOUSING

- Tortoises should ideally not be kept in a vivarium as respiratory problems are common in poorly ventilated vivariums. However to maintain humidity levels, some tropical tortoises such as the Hinge-backs may need to be kept in adapted vivarium set ups. If keeping your tortoise in a vivarium ensure adequate ventilation by adding extra ventilation holes. Alternatively a floor pen or tortoise table may be created. This needs to have solid sides (1 foot high) for most tortoises. Many are made out of wood or plastic. As large an area as possible should be provided, but as the size increases extra basking sites will need to be provided. For a small juvenile at least 90 cm (3 feet) long x 30 cm (1 foot) wide is recommended. This is required to enable a thermal gradient to be created along the length of the enclosure (hot to cold).
- Hides are required to provide some security in these shy species. Artificial plants, cardboard boxes, plant pots, logs or commercially available hides can be used. They should be placed both at the warm and cooler ends of the tank.
- Substrates suitable for housing tortoises include newspaper, Astroturf, and some of the commercially available substrates. Natural substrates such as soil, peat or bark mulch may also be used to allow for digging and help maintain humidity. It is important that the substrates either cannot be eaten, or if they

are, do not cause blockages as this can prove fatal. Wood chip based substrates should never be used for this reason.

- The enclosure should be cleaned out at least once a week with a suitable disinfectant and spot cleaned daily to help prevent disease.

TEMPERATURES AND HUMIDITY

- Reptiles are ectothermic so a heat source is required.
- Typically a spot area is created using a spot bulb, providing a basking temperature of 32°C. This should be kept on all day. Temperatures must be measured to ensure the tank is not overheating especially in a small vivarium. The cool end should be maintained at 24°C.
- Background heat can be provided with a heat mat (on the back wall) a tubular heater, a heat plate, ceramic bulb or room heating. This should be set on a thermostat so that the overnight temperature does not drop below 22°C.
- Temperatures should be measured with a maximum/minimum thermometer. During the cold winter months careful checking is required to ensure the heat sources are keeping the tank sufficiently warm. Heat sources should be guarded to prevent thermal burns.
- Humidity is important for most of these species and this has to be taken in balance with ventilation requirements. Regular misting with warm water and providing an area of damp substrate (for example within a cat litter tray) can help maintain a moderate humidity level. Humidity should be checked with a hygrometer and kept moderate (~50%).

LIGHTING

- Hinge-back tortoises must be exposed to UV-b light.
- Combined heat and UV-b lamps can be used or alternatively separate UV-b bulbs are available. If using separate heating and lighting, ensure that these are placed at the same end of the enclosure to replicate a natural basking spot (please ask for further information on UV light in reptiles).
- All UV-b bulbs should be checked regularly for their UV output and should be changed at least as frequently as manufacturer's instructions.
- It is also important to expose your tortoise to natural UV light on warm days during the summer months and building an outside enclosure is recommended for the long term health of your tortoise.

WHAT TO FEED

- Hinge-back tortoises are omnivorous and their diet should consist of a wide variety of plant material with animal matter provided once per week (more frequently in young growing animals). Suitable animal matter may include appropriately sourced crickets, mealworms, earthworms, snails, millipedes, slugs, pinkies and low-fat dog food. Suitable plant material includes fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, hay and weeds (e.g. sow thistles, dandelions, milk thistles, plantains, chickweed, dock and bindweed). Other plants and flowers such as sedum, hibiscus, nasturtium and honeysuckle are also suitable. Any food given should be free of pesticides or fertilizer.
- Supplementation is important, particularly with live food and supermarket bought goods and a vitamin and mineral powder with high calcium content is required. It is important to ensure the phosphorous

content is low. Cuttlefish is often fed to tortoises and although it is to be encouraged it should not be relied upon as a calcium source.

- Water should always be available and a container is required which will allow the tortoise to submerge completely. This should be changed daily. Bathing is also to be encouraged and twice a week the tortoise should be placed in a shallow bath of warm water (usually a cat litter tray suffices).

COMPANIONS

- In general the happiest tortoise is the solitary tortoise. Adults can be maintained in single sex groups of up to five in suitable accommodation. Should breeding be required the males can be exposed to the females during the summer months.

SALMONELLA

- All reptiles can potentially carry Salmonella.
- However it is rarely a cause of illness in reptiles and treatment is not required.
- It can be transmitted to people (especially young children or those who are immuno-compromised) so good hygiene after handling the reptile is important. Generally washing your hands in soap is sufficient. There are commercially available disinfectants that can be used as an alternative.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

We recommend annual health checks every year for pet reptiles as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

For further information, see www.tortoisetrust.org and www.britishchelonigroup.org.uk