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*This handout is intended to provide only very general guidelines. Consult with your veterinarian about other aspects of advanced care that can be considered to ensure adequate health.*

## General Information

The Redfoot Tortoise (*Chelonoidis Geochelone carbonaria*) has a dark shell and skin with striking red coloration on the head and legs. Although native to several regions of South America, Redfoot tortoises are bred commonly in the US. When scared, tortoises will withdraw their body into their shell and their armored front legs will protect their head from predators. The shell is living tissue and should never be pierced or painted. Adult size is 11-14" on average with females generally being smaller than males.

## Lifespan

The average life span for Redfoot tortoises is 40-80 years!

## Sexing

Once mature, males will have an indent on their plastron (bottom of the shell) and a longer, more pointed tail than females.

## Housing

Tortoises need large enclosures - 75 gallon tank or larger, or can be kept outdoors when weather permits. Large containers such as Rubbermaid storage boxes or livestock troughs can also be used for enclosures. There should be at least one or two hides provided- half log, half buried clay pot, etc. and a water dish that will fit the tortoise's entire body length and be a few inches deep to allow easy access in and out. Outdoor pens will need to be secure to keep tortoises in and predators (especially dogs) out.

## Substrate

Tortoises should be able to make shallow burrows in the substrate so a mixture of several of the following is best: organic soil, coco coir, peat moss, sphagnum moss, dead leaves. Avoid cedar/pine/aspen mulches, sand, carefresh bedding, alfalfa pellets, and sand. Non-toxic live plants can be planted directly in the substrate or kept in pots to provide cover and enrichment for your tortoise.

## Lighting and temperature

Tortoises need a warm place to bask (80-90 degrees) on one side of the cage in order digest food and nutrients properly. The other side of the cage should be cooler (70-75 degrees) so they can escape the heat. A thermometer should be placed at both ends of the cage to accurately measure temperatures. Lights should be on for 10-12 hours each day and then total darkness at night. Night temperatures can safely drop to 60 degrees so a nighttime heat source is not necessary in most homes.

Redfoot tortoises **MUST** have UVB light to survive and a lack of UVB may lead to Metabolic Bone Disease which can lead to severe deformations, pathologic fractures, or even death. A commercially available UVB bulb is necessary as UVB does not penetrate glass or plastic so having the cage near a window does not work. Over time, most bulbs will stop emitting adequate


















levels of UVB, so it's important to change the bulb every 6-12 months. Nothing beats natural sunlight however, so if your tortoise can get real sunlight in a protected area this is always preferred.

### Humidity

Humidity in the enclosure should be 60-80% and should be measured by a hygrometer. Often Redfoot tortoises need partially enclosed enclosures and the aid of a humidifier or mister to maintain appropriate humidity levels.

### Diet

Redfoot tortoises are primarily herbivores and need a variety of high quality vegetables and fruits. This species does benefit from small amount of animal protein a few times a month as well, but not too much as it can cause problems.

Staple Vegetables (high in calcium and other necessary nutrients)- 70% of diet					
Collard Greens 	Turnip Greens 	Mustard Greens 	Swiss Chard 	Bok Choy 	Dandelion Greens 
Occasional foods/treats – 20% of the diet					
Sweet Potato 	Papaya 	Kale 	Butternut Squash 	Berries 	Mango 
Protein Sources- 10% of diet					
Worms 	Eggs 	Chicken/turkey 	Low fat dog food 	Snails/slugs 	

### Supplementation

A powdered calcium supplement (without phosphorus) should be lightly sprinkled over the food 1-2 times weekly. A piece of cuttlebone in the enclosure will also provide extra calcium and help your tortoise file their beak to avoid excessive growth.

### Water

A shallow water dish at least as big as your tortoise with fresh water must always be available. The dishes used under potted plants are excellent for water dishes since they have shallow sides and they're inexpensive. Terra cotta dishes also help keep toenails short as they crawl in and out. Water should be spot cleaned daily.

### Hibernation

Redfoot tortoises cannot hibernate and should remain within appropriate temperature ranges throughout the year. Heating sources should be used during colder seasons to maintain appropriate environment. Attempts to hibernate will quickly cause illness and death in this species.

## Common Medical Conditions

### Vitamin A deficiency

- This is a common condition that occurs in many captive reptiles and may lead to secondary infection in your tortoise. Abscesses/pus may develop in the tortoise's ears and cause visible swelling of the eyes, ears, or head.

### Metabolic Bone Disease

- Insufficient calcium supplementation causes a deficiency in calcium in many reptile species. When calcium is insufficient, some animals mobilize calcium from bone. This causes the bone to become brittle and prone to fractures.

### Trauma

- Tortoises can also be injured through handling, falling from heights, or being stepped on. Remember, the shell is part of the skeleton, so a shell fracture is just as serious or more so than a broken bone.

### Reproductive Disease

- Egg binding/dystocia – eggs become too large or misshapen and are unable to be delivered
- Coelomitis - a ruptured egg releases yolk into the body cavity resulting in a severe bacterial infection
- Follicular stasis - egg development stops and inactive follicles take up space in the body cavity

### Prolapse

- This is the everting of the cloacal, GI, or reproductive structures through the cloacal opening.
- If noticed, we recommend applying a dilute sugar solution to help reduce swelling, and contacting your veterinarian right away as if left untreated, the prolapsed tissue can die which can lead to a serious life-threatening infection.

## References

*Animal Hospital in Centennial, CO.* Aurora Animal Hospital. (n.d.). <https://www.auroraanimalhospital.com/>

Divers, S. J., & Stahl, S. J. (2019). *Mader's reptile and Amphibian Medicine and Surgery*. Elsevier.

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