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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

Tegus (*Salvator merianae*) are large South American lizards native to Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia. They have recently become very popular pets due to their impressive size and how closely they tend to bond with their caretakers. Owning tegus can quickly become an expensive hobby given their large size and naturally voracious appetite, and because of this, they are not generally recommended as a beginner reptile. Tegus have become an invasive species largely in Florida and Georgia where they have been released from captivity. It is NEVER recommended to release your reptile out into the wild, and if you find that you are no longer able to care for your pet, there are local reptile and amphibian rescues that may be able to help find them a new home.

## Lifespan

With adequate husbandry and care, Tegus can live up to 15-20 years.

## Sexing

Young Tegus show no visual differences. As they reach sexual maturity around 3 years of age, males will become larger with significantly larger heads/jowls, and hemipene bulges can sometimes be spotted at the base of the tail.

## Housing

Tegus grow rapidly so you will need to plan appropriately for housing. A large, adult male can reach 4-5ft in length and will require a minimum space of 3 feet by 6 feet by 6 feet once fully mature. Most tegu owners end up making custom cages out of wood to provide enough space and maintain temperatures and humidity. Sturdy branches can be used as cage furniture, but securing cage furniture is strongly recommended, as these are strong and active lizards.

## Substrate

Tegus love to dig, so providing them with a deep layer of substrate allows them to exhibit natural behaviors. A mixture of coconut coir, sand, and mulch will help to maintain humidity and will hold its shape as your tegu burrows and digs. Ensure that your tegu's substrate doesn't become too wet, as increased moisture increases the risk of bacterial and fungal growth.

## Lighting and temperature

Tegus need a warm place to bask (100-110 degrees) on one side of the cage in order to digest food properly. The other side of the cage should be cooler (75-80 degrees) so they can appropriately thermoregulate. A thermometer should be placed at both ends of the cage or a laser thermometer may be used to measure temperatures. Lights should be on for 10-12 hours each day and total darkness is recommended at night- a ceramic heat lamp may be used to keep the enclosure warmer if needed but avoid nighttime infrared bulbs. Night temperatures should be greater than or equal to 70 degrees. Tegus tend to be solitary animals and should be housed separately to avoid aggression-related injury.

Many tegu keepers create what is called a Rete's Stack that sits below the basking bulb to aid in thermoregulation. This is a shelf system that allows your tegu to move closer or further from the basking site. Care should be given to protect your lizard from access to hot basking bulbs and prevent burns. In addition, hides should be provided at each end of the enclosure to allow for shade and privacy.























UVB light is highly recommended, and a lack of UVB may lead to Metabolic Bone Disease which can result in severe deformation, pathologic fractures, and 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. Look for UVB listed specifically on retail packaging before buying. T5 UVB bulbs provide better zones of UVB than compact fluorescents. After about 6-9 months of use, most bulbs will stop emitting adequate levels of UVB, even though they are still shining, so it's important to change the bulb every 6-9 months.

### Humidity

Tegus are native to very humid climates, and dehydration is a common problem in captivity. Humidity should be maintained around 75-90% by misting the enclosure several times a day.

### Diet

Tegus are omnivores in the wild and take advantage of a variety of prey items and vegetation. Diets containing a large amount of fat and protein will lead to obesity and shorten the life of your tegu. 60% of your tegu's diet should be made of high quality proteins, such as insects. Crickets and dubia roaches are a great and nutritious option that also provide enrichment and exercise. Make sure to gutload any feeder insects with fresh produce and dark leafy greens. Approximately 30% of your tegu's diet should be made up of vegetables and dark, leafy greens. The last 10% of your tegu's diet can be made up of fruit.

High Quality Protein – 60% of diet					
Crickets	Dubia Roaches	Superworms	Eggs	Dog Food	
					
Snails/slugs	Worms	Chicken/turkey	Pinky Mice	Chicks	
					
Vegetables and dark leafy greens (staples for gutloading)- 30% of diet					
Collard Greens	Turnip Greens	Mustard Greens	Swiss Chard	Butternut squash	Sweet potato
					
Fruits and flowers- 10%					
Bananas	Papaya	Flowers	Apples	Berries	Mango
					

### Gutloading

Gutloading is the process of feeding insects a vitamin and calcium rich diet prior to offering them to your reptile to ensure they contain the required nutrients to keep your reptile healthy. Supplementing calcium and multivitamin powder is important, but not sufficient to meet their needs alone. To create an appropriate gut loading diet, use one or two staple vegetables on the list above and feed it to the insects 6-24 hours before feeding those insects to your reptile. While convenient, some commercially available gut loading formulas (Farms Orange Cubes, Fluker Farms High Calcium Cricket Diet, Nature Zone Cricket Bites) are low in calcium, imbalanced and/or insufficient for good nutrition. Some preferred commercial gut loading diets are Repashy Superload, Cricket Crack, and Super Chow.

### Supplementation

Lightly dust all food items with a calcium carbonate or calcium gluconate supplement (**without phosphorus or vitamin D3, as this can lead to toxicity**) 1-2 times weekly. A reptile multi-vitamin may be used once monthly. Calcium and vitamin supplements are not needed if using whole prey items such as mice or chicks.

### Water

A large water dish with fresh water must be available at all times for drinking and soaking. Rubbermaid bins may be used for adults. Water should be changed frequently to keep it free of substrate and feces.

## Common medical conditions

### Metabolic bone disease

- This is caused by a deficiency of calcium, ultraviolet light, and/or vitamin D3 that can lead to numerous problems including poor bone quality and pathologic fractures.
- Neonatal and juvenile reptiles, as well as reproductively active females have a higher demand for calcium and are more vulnerable to this condition.

### 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

### Obesity

- This happens when they are fed a diet too high in fat, or they are not provided with sufficient space for exercise.
- Obesity can lead to diseases of the heart, liver and joints. Tegus are particularly prone to a condition called hepatic lipidosis which is where fat is mobilized and stored in the liver which, left untreated, can result in liver dysfunction or even failure.

## References

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

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