

Hypovitaminosis A is one of the most common diagnoses in chelonians, and in most cases is a misdiagnosis neglecting the true cause of swollen eyes, respiratory system problems, and other outward symptoms. While Vitamin A deficiency can be an underlying cause to the above health issues, in particular turtles and tortoises fed deficient diets, with the expansion of knowledge of husbandry and diet, hypovitaminosis A is relatively uncommon and the diagnoses and treatment with injectable Vitamin A is simply an outdated approach. If hypovitaminosis A is suspected, the use of injectable Vitamin A supplements is often given; the affects are often painful for the turtle or tortoise, can cause internal organ failure because this Vitamin is fat soluble, stored primarily in the liver, and in many cases death can occur.

Symptoms of Hypovitaminosis A include: corneal epithelial dysfunction (inflammation), thinning of the skin, and in more severe cases the skin will be raw resulting in a potential for secondary infection. Large areas of sloughing will likely occur with the potential of ulceration. In some cases of Vitamin A deficiency, respiratory problems could also manifest presenting with a runny nose due to the likely degeneration of the lung tissue.

In the case of Hypervitaminosis A (overdose) many of these same symptoms occur. Swollen eyes, skin will present as thin with severe cases the skin sloughing exposing rawness, sometimes ulceration, nails may fall off and in fatal cases the beak may also fall off before the death of the animal.

If Hypovitaminosis A is suspected we ask that all aspects of the Chelonians diet and habitat be explored, and other health issues be considered and treated before the consideration of aggressively treating the animal for Vitamin A deficiency. In most cases dietary exploration and the addition of food high in Vitamin A or beta-carotene will easily reverse this deficiency. If the turtle or tortoise is not feeding, our recommendation is to initiate tube feeding with species appropriate foods. Also be sure in the case of turtles that need a humid environment that they have the humidity required as lack of humidity has time and again presented turtles with swollen eyes and has been easily treated with simply raising the humidity in the enclosure.

Below are just a couple of pictures showing the effects of Hypervitaminosis A.



Yellowfoot Tortoise hatchling



Hingeback Tortoise



I would also like to add a warning about the use of Ivermectin for deworming turtles and tortoises. This also has been found to be fatal in many Chelonian species.

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