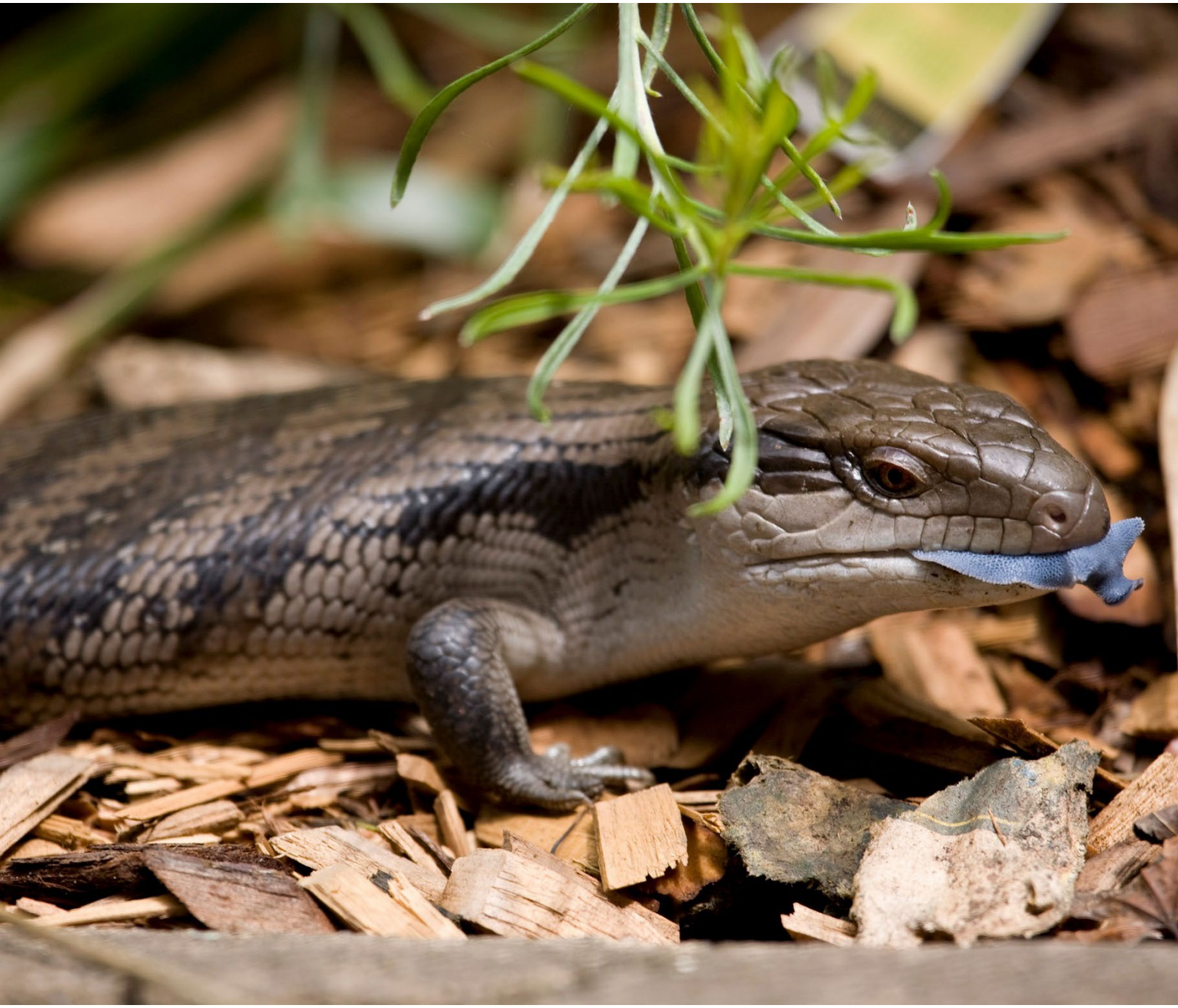

Hygiene and care for preventing disease in captive reptiles

Department of Climate Change,
Energy, the Environment and Water

NSW GOVERNMENT

Acknowledgement of Country

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

This resource may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs or historical content.

Artist and designer Nikita Ridgeway from Aboriginal design agency Boss Lady Creative Designs created the People and Community symbol.

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Contents

Preface 1

1. Introduction 1
   - 1.1 Who should read this document? 2
   - 1.2 Definitions 2
2. Preventing disease 3
   - 2.1 Infectious diseases 3
   - 2.2 Non-infectious diseases 7
3. Dealing with sick or dead reptiles 8
4. Common diseases and clinical signs 9
   - 4.1 Clinical signs that may indicate disease in reptiles 9
   - 4.2 Common diseases in reptiles 9
5. References 12
6. Further reading 12
   - Legislation 12
   - NSW Government resources 12
   - Published books and scientific articles 12
   - Video resources 13
   - Other resources 14

List of tables

Table 1 Common diseases in reptiles 10

Preface

This guide is intended for those authorised under the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* to keep native reptiles. It sets out guidelines and recommendations for the prevention and control of disease in captive native reptiles, and for reducing and managing risks to the health and safety of keepers or any others who come into contact with captive native reptiles.

It does not remove the need to abide by the requirements of the Code of Practice for the Private Keeping of Reptiles (for animal keepers), any other specific conditions listed on your authority to keep native reptiles, or:

- the NSW *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*
- the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*
- the NSW *Local Government Act 1993*
- the Commonwealth and NSW *Biosecurity Act 2015*
- the Commonwealth *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*

or any other relevant laws and regulations.

The guide is neither a complete manual nor a static document. It will be periodically reviewed to incorporate new knowledge on disease prevention in captive reptiles. It replaces the *Hygiene protocol for the control of disease in captive snakes* (NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change 2008).

1. Introduction

A growing number of diseases have the potential to cause serious immediate and long-term consequences for captive and wild reptiles in Australia.

- **Infectious** diseases are caused by pathogens (disease-causing organisms) and can be spread from one person or animal to another.
- **Non-infectious** diseases are generally caused by genetic or environmental factors, such as a nutritional disease resulting from improper care, and cannot be spread from one animal to another.

Following good hygiene and care practices when keeping native reptiles is important to reducing the likelihood of disease in them and the potential for the spread of infectious diseases to humans, other wild or captive reptiles, or other animals. This document outlines hygiene and care guidelines designed to prevent and control disease. It covers:

- personal hygiene and how to prevent reptiles from contracting disease (Chapter 2)
- how to deal with sick or dead reptiles and to control the spread of infectious diseases (Chapter 3)
- common diseases found in reptiles and a list of clinical signs that may indicate them (Chapter 4).

1.1 Who should read this document?

This document is recommended for:

- individuals authorised to keep native reptiles under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act*
- individuals interested in keeping native reptiles in NSW.

1.2 Definitions

In this document:

- **clinical signs** are visible indications of a medical condition, disease or injury
- an **exotic animal** is any animal that is not native to Australia
- an **infectious disease** is caused by pathogens such as bacteria, viruses, protozoans or fungi, and can be spread from one person or animal to another
- a **non-infectious disease** is not caused by a pathogen but by genetic or environmental factors
- a **notifiable disease** is a disease that, upon suspicion or detection, must under law be reported to the relevant Commonwealth or NSW authorities
- a **pathogen** (or infectious agent) is an organism that can cause disease
- **quarantine** is a period of isolation of animals suspected or known to be carrying an infectious agent or disease to prevent the spread to other animals
- a **reptile** is any reptile listed or referred to in Schedule 5 of the *Biodiversity Conservation Act* that is native to Australia, including their eggs and young. It includes snakes, lizards (skinks, geckos, dragons and monitors), turtles and other members of the class Reptilia
- **substrate** is the material used for lining an enclosure in which an animal is housed
- **zoonotic** refers to an infectious disease or pathogen that can be passed between humans and animals.

2. Preventing disease

2.1 Infectious diseases

It is important to acquire reptiles from a disease-free environment and to maintain a high level of hygiene and care when keeping or handling them and associated equipment so as to reduce the likelihood of pathogens being spread between reptiles or to humans.

2.1.1 Acquiring reptiles from a disease-free environment

Be alert to the increased disease risk posed by poor hygiene and care practices and by exposure to exotic animals and pathogens. Don't buy reptiles from unhygienic or untrustworthy sources, or reptiles that may have been exposed to or kept near exotic animals.

Note that in addition to the increased disease risk, it is illegal for a member of the public to keep exotic reptiles. If you see or suspect someone to be keeping an exotic reptile, please report it to the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development via an online form.

2.1.2 Personal hygiene

Always wash your hands with hot soapy water after touching or cleaning up after reptiles, enclosures, furnishings, reptile food and any other areas where reptiles are kept.

- Cover cuts and other open wounds before handling reptiles.
- If a bite or scratch breaks the skin, wash it with warm water and antibacterial soap, dry it and apply an antibacterial ointment. Seek medical attention if required.
- Do not put your hands near or in your mouth, or eat or drink while handling a reptile or cleaning up after it.
- Do not kiss a reptile, place any part of it near your face, or share food or drink with it.
- Keep reptiles and their associated equipment away from places where human food is prepared or eaten, and from sinks, showers or bathtubs where humans wash.
- Keep the reptiles in an escape-proof enclosure.
- Limit the reptiles to restricted parts of the house if they are periodically allowed to roam.

Children, older adults and individuals with compromised immunity

Children under 5, adults aged over 65, pregnant and breastfeeding parents and individuals with compromised immune systems are at higher risk of contracting disease. They should either avoid contact with reptiles, their equipment, and any surfaces the reptile has access to, or use strict hygiene measures.

- Teach children good hygiene and handling practices.
- Always supervise young or inexperienced children when they are handling reptiles.
- It is not recommended that reptiles be kept in households where children under 5 years live or when expecting a newborn child (unless medical advice is sought and strict hygiene measures are implemented).

2.1.3 Reptile hygiene

To prevent disease, house reptiles individually or in small, single-species groups (if the species is naturally a social species and all animals get on well together), as keeping a large number of animals and mixed-species groups can increase the likelihood of disease transmission.

Regular vet checks, observation and record-keeping

Engage a veterinarian (vet) with experience with reptiles to check the animals every 6 to 12 months, as reptiles are good at hiding if they are suffering from disease and can take several months to display clinical signs.

- Observe and monitor the reptiles daily so that you can identify any abnormal behaviour that may indicate illness and may require examination by a vet.
- Weigh the reptiles regularly, as this is the best way to know whether they are gaining weight (as juveniles) or losing weight (if unwell).
- Keep a written health record of each animal, recording significant details and dates, such as:
  - date of arrival and where it came from
  - date and weight each time the reptile is weighed
  - date and nature of any clinical signs observed that may indicate disease, such as abnormal shedding (see Chapter 4 for a list of clinical signs)
  - date of any visit to a vet and any treatment
  - date, type of food offered and whether it was consumed (fully, partially or not consumed).

Cleaning and disinfecting

Procedures for routine cleaning and disinfecting

- Spot-clean daily by removing faeces or other waste material (such as uneaten food).

- Thoroughly clean and disinfect each enclosure once a week using the following 2-step process:
  - Step 1: Cleaning
    - Remove the reptile and put it temporarily into an escape-proof container or spare enclosure that has been cleaned and disinfected between reptiles.
    - Remove furnishings (water bowls etc.) from the enclosure and clean them by scrubbing with a brush and hot soapy water. Rinse off any soap or detergent, as some residues can deactivate disinfectants, and allow the furnishings to dry.
    - If you are using a paper substrate, remove it and fold it in on itself so that faecal and other waste matter doesn't fall out, and throw it in an enclosed rubbish bin.
    - Remove and throw away soiled natural or disposable substrates (e.g. sand or bark) into an enclosed rubbish bin – do not compost them, as this could spread pathogens.
    - Throw away any other items that cannot be cleaned into an enclosed rubbish bin – do not compost them, as this could spread pathogens.
    - When the enclosure is empty, scrub it with a brush and hot soapy water. Rinse off or wipe away any soap or detergent, as some residues can deactivate disinfectants, and allow the enclosure to dry.
    - Dispose of any wastewater in the toilet and then clean the toilet thoroughly.
  - Step 2: Disinfecting
    - Disinfect the enclosure and furnishings with an appropriate reptile-safe disinfectant (see *What disinfectant to use* below).
    - Follow the manufacturer's instructions or your vet's advice in applying the disinfectant to all enclosures and furnishings.
    - After disinfection, thoroughly rinse the furnishings and enclosure with tap water, or wipe them down to remove any residual disinfectant.
    - Rinse out and disinfect the scrubbing brush and other cleaning equipment and leave it to air dry.
    - Leave the enclosure to air dry before putting in clean substrate and furnishings and, finally, the reptile.

What disinfectant to use

- Consult your vet for advice on what disinfectant to use when cleaning and disinfecting enclosures. Different products offer varying levels of strength, function and use.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions or your vet's advice in using a reptile-safe disinfectant.

Cleaning equipment

- Use separate cleaning equipment for each reptile enclosure.
- Use a separate bucket or plastic container for each enclosure and its furnishings.
- After emptying the dirty water into the toilet, clean all containers used for cleaning and soak them in disinfectant after use.
- Turn reptile bags inside out and turn other carrying equipment over a rubbish bin to dispose of any faeces, and then wash the bags or equipment.
- Soak reptile bags in reptile-safe disinfectant, following the manufacturer's instructions, and then wash them separately from any other items.

Newly acquired reptiles and the reuse of enclosures and furnishings

- If you plan to use an enclosure for a new or different animal, disinfect it first and then leave it empty for at least 2 weeks before housing the new animal in it.
- Before putting a new reptile into an enclosure, ensure that the enclosure and all its associated equipment and furnishings are clean and have been disinfected.
- Seek veterinary advice before reusing enclosures that have held sick reptiles.

Quarantine all new and sick reptiles

If you are adding new reptiles to an existing collection, place snakes in quarantine for at least 6 months, and lizards and turtles for at least 30 days, or as advised by your vet, and monitor their health for any signs of disease (see Chapter 4). If any animals are sick, ask your vet how long you should quarantine them.

Quarantine setup and procedure

- Assume that all new reptiles may be carrying disease – keep them in quarantine in a separate room or as far away as possible from other reptiles or captive animals.
- Keep the quarantine area as simple as possible – use easy-to-clean enclosures, minimal furnishings that are easily disinfected, and paper substrate, as this makes it easier to spot evidence of potential disease (such as parasites or abnormal faeces).
- If you have other reptiles or animals in a collection, clean and handle them before the animals in quarantine so that you do not accidentally spread disease to the main collection.
- In large collections where reptiles are kept in separate locations at the one site, install a disinfecting footbath at the entry to and exit from the quarantine area.
- Use separate equipment for cleaning, feeding and medicating animals in quarantine – where possible, use disposable items.
- Wear personal protective equipment (can include disposable gloves, coveralls, foot covers).
- Thoroughly wash your hands with hot, soapy water after handling any animals in quarantine.

- Closely monitor any reptile in quarantine for signs of disease or other problems. Keep a written record of observations made and any subsequent treatment.
- Ask your vet to examine the reptiles before they leave quarantine to ensure they are disease-free. Follow the vet's advice on care and treatment of reptiles in quarantine.

Quarantine a collection after an unexplained death

If an animal has died from unknown causes, you should not expose any other animals to a potential disease. Wait at least 6 months before introducing any new animals into the collection. Do not pass on or sell any animal to anyone else for at least 6 months after the unexplained death of a snake and for at least 30 days after the unexplained death of a lizard or turtle.

Make sure the reptiles are not stressed

Stressed animals are more susceptible to disease than healthy animals living in appropriate environments. Follow the advice of your vet and the Code of Practice for the Private Keeping of Reptiles (for animal keepers) and any other applicable or subsequent codes of practice concerning the proper diet and environment for your reptile.

Keep the reptiles secure

Reptiles must be kept in secure enclosures from which they cannot inadvertently escape into the wild, where they may spread diseases to other native animals.

2.2 Non-infectious diseases

To prevent non-infectious diseases in your reptiles, you must understand and follow care requirements specific to the species.

- Follow the advice of your vet, the Code of Practice for the Private Keeping of Reptiles (for animal keepers), and any other applicable or subsequent codes of practice.
- Thoroughly understand the species, including their physiological, environmental and behavioural needs.
- Maintain regular vet checks every 6 to 12 months and talk to your vet immediately if you notice any changes in the reptiles' behaviour or physical condition.
- Ensure that the enclosures maintain the security, safety and wellbeing of the reptiles.
- Provide an appropriate range of temperatures to allow the reptiles to maintain the ideal range of body temperatures, and adequately ventilate the enclosures to maintain appropriate humidity levels.
- Provide the reptiles with an appropriate light/dark cycle with lighting that supplies their UV requirements.
- Use appropriate substrate and furnishings to allow the reptiles to engage in their natural behaviours, such as climbing, burrowing or hiding.

- Provide the reptiles with a balanced diet that maintains their good health, and always provide adequate clean water in a quality and manner that meets the species' requirements.

3. Dealing with sick or dead reptiles

When dealing with sick or dead reptiles, to minimise the impact on a collection and avoid the spread of disease to wild animals, it is important to:

- wear personal protective equipment such as disposable gloves
- remove sick reptiles from the collection, place them in quarantine (see *Quarantine setup and procedure*) and immediately seek veterinary advice
- seek veterinary advice in the case of a sudden unexplained death of one or more animals in a collection where the cause of death is not obvious, to rule out any infectious disease that may be present in the collection
  - if your vet advises a post-mortem examination, seal the body, put it in an esky with ice bricks (do not freeze) and take it to the vet or laboratory without delay
- dispose of dead reptiles in accordance with the requirements of your local council (contact your council's environmental health section)
- seal any animal that you cannot dispose of immediately or that you wish to have taxidermied (when confirmed to be disease-free), seal it in a leak-proof container, double-bag it and store it in a fridge or freezer that is not used to store human or animal food
- dispose of any associated contaminated furnishings or material that cannot be disinfected (such as paper or natural substrate, sticks or branches) in accordance with the requirements of your local council (contact your council's environmental health section)
- disinfect the enclosure and any associated furnishings and equipment that have come into contact with the sick reptile (see *Procedures for routine cleaning and disinfecting*) and leave to air dry
- do not use the enclosure for 2 weeks after it has been cleaned and disinfected.

4. Common diseases and clinical signs

If a reptile is showing any of the signs listed below, contact your vet immediately.

4.1 Clinical signs that may indicate disease in reptiles

- Abnormal breathing
- Abnormal shedding of the skin (dysecdysis)
- Agitation
- Biting or scratching a specific area
- Bubbles from the nose
- Convulsions
- Chronic regurgitation
- Disorientation
- Head shakes (tremors)
- Inability of snakes to strike or constrict
- Increased drinking or urination
- Lesions, scabs, wounds or swellings
- Loss of weight
- Loss of coordination
- Loss of toes or tail
- Misshapen bones or shells (abnormal posture, hunched spine, sideways curve of the spine)
- Mouth rot (stomatitis)
- Not eating
- Not moving around, immobility or lethargy
- Pale or dull skin
- Paralysis
- Presence of parasites on the surface of the skin or between scales
- ‘Stargazing’
- Swollen, squinting, or partly or fully closed eyes

4.2 Common diseases in reptiles

A variety of diseases have been detected in both free-ranging and captive native reptiles. Table 1 lists several of the more common diseases detected in reptiles.

Diseases are categorised by the type of pathogen or infectious agent (bacterial, fungal, viral or parasitic) responsible. Table 1 provides information about the taxonomic range of the diseases in reptiles, and whether the diseases are zoonotic or notifiable.

If you or your vet suspects or confirms that an animal is infected with a notifiable disease, ask your vet whether you or they will report it to the authorities.

For confirmed cases of other infectious diseases in native reptiles, you or your vet are encouraged to submit a veterinary or laboratory report to Wildlife Health Australia, which administers Australia's general wildlife health surveillance system.

Table 1 Common diseases in reptiles

Type	Commonly known as	Taxonomic range in reptiles	Zoonotic disease	Notifiable disease
Infectious diseases				
Bacterial	Dermatophilosis	All reptiles	Yes	No[1]
Bacterial	*Enterococcus lacertideformus*	Lizards, especially skinks and geckos	No	No[1]
Bacterial	Mycobacteriosis	All reptiles	Yes	Infection with some species of *Mycobacterium* is notifiable[2]
Bacterial	Salmonellosis	All reptiles	Yes	No[1]
Fungal	Various fungal infections, mycosis, dermatoses	All reptiles	Yes	No[1]
Parasitic	Blood protozoan parasitic diseases	All reptiles	Some diseases, such as Chagas' disease, are zoonotic	Some diseases, such as Chagas' disease, are notifiable[2]
Parasitic	Ectoparasites (such as mites, ticks or leeches)	All reptiles	Yes	No[1]
Parasitic	Endoparasites (such as gastrointestinal worms)	All reptiles	No	No[1]
Viral	Adenoviruses (e.g. agamid adenovirus-1)	All reptiles, especially bearded dragons	No	No[1]

Type	Commonly known as	Taxonomic range in reptiles	Zoonotic disease	Notifiable disease
Viral	Arenaviruses (e.g. Inclusion Body Disease, 'IBD')	Snakes, especially pythons and elapids	No	No[1]
Viral	Bornavirus	Snakes	No	No[3]
Viral	Iridoviruses (e.g. ranaviruses)	All reptiles	No	No[1]
Viral	Nidoviruses (e.g. Bellinger River virus, bobtail flu, snake nidovirus)	All reptiles	No	No[1]
Viral	Paramyxoviruses (e.g. Sunshine virus) or ferlaviruses[4] (previously known as Ophidian Paramyxovirus, 'OPMV')	Snakes, especially pythons, and lizards	No	No[1]
Non-infectious diseases				
Nutritional	Metabolic bone disease, 'MBD'	All reptiles	No	No
Unknown aetiology	Tumours, abnormal tissue growth, neoplasia	All reptiles	No	No

[1] While these diseases are not notifiable, you or your vet are encouraged to submit any confirmed reports to Wildlife Health Australia, which administers Australia's general wildlife health surveillance system.

[2] Notifiable diseases were accurate at the time of writing. For an up-to-date list, refer to the *Notifiable pests and diseases of animals in NSW* and the *National list of notifiable animal diseases*.

[3] Infection with *Orthobornavirus bornaense* (formerly known as Borna disease virus) is a notifiable disease that primarily affects mammals. Bornaviruses that affect reptiles are not notifiable (Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, personal communication, 3 June 2025); however, you are encouraged to submit any confirmed reports to Wildlife Health Australia.

[4] Ferlavirus is an exotic pathogen that has caused widespread mortality in captive snake collections internationally. The status of this virus and its role in disease in Australian snakes still need to be clarified, but there is currently no convincing evidence that it is present in Australia (Wildlife Health Australia 2023).

5. References

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Wildlife Health Australia (2023) *Ferlavirus in snakes fact sheet February 2023* (PDF 296KB), WHA website, accessed 24 March 2025.

6. Further reading

Legislation

NSW *Animal Research Act 1985*

NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*

NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Regulation 2017*

NSW *Biosecurity Act 2015*

Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*

NSW *Local Government Act 1993*

NSW *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*

NSW Government resources

NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, *Animal welfare*, NSW DPIRD website.

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Wilson S and Swan G (2021) *A complete guide to reptiles of Australia*, 6th edn, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, Australia.

Video resources

Kellyville Pets Masterclass Courses for Pythons, Bearded Dragons, and Turtles, https://www.kellyvillepets.com.au/pages/pet-school-online-course-python-masterclass

NSW Department of Education, Animal Care and Management videos for bearded dragons, https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/animals-in-schools/animals-in-schools-resources/videos-animal-care-and-management/bearded-dragon-videos

NSW Department of Education, Animal Care and Management videos for bluetongue lizards, https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/animals-in-schools/animals-in-schools-resources/videos-animal-care-and-management/blue-tongue-videos

NSW Department of Education, Animal Care and Management videos for long-necked turtles, https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/animals-in-schools/animals-in-schools-resources/videos-animal-care-and-management/turtle-videos

NSW Department of Education, Animal Care and Management videos for small pythons, https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/animals-in-schools/animals-in-schools-resources/videos-animal-care-and-management/python-videos

Other resources

Australian Registry of Wildlife Health.

Currumbin Valley Vet (2024) *Common Health Concerns in Reptiles*.

Currumbin Valley Vet (2024) *The Importance of Proper Reptile Care – Maintaining an Appropriate Environment*.

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