

LIZARD LETTERS

Dear Editor:

My 6-year-old pet iguana recently died suddenly after consuming T-Rex Iguana Dry Formula (Adult Vegi). He was perfectly healthy when I fed him. A few minutes later, I found him thrashing violently from side to side with his mouth open, obviously in respiratory distress. His skin was pale and yellow instead of his usual dark green. He was breathing only in small squeaking gasps, and these became less frequent as he tired from the thrashing. He closed his eyes. Breaths were now more than a minute apart.

Thinking that he was choking, I performed several chest compressions—my best reptilian version of the Heimlich maneuver, without success. I forcibly opened his mouth and removed several pieces of iguana chow, then sped off to the local vet. By the time I arrived, his heart was not beating, as demonstrated by a Doppler probe, and there was nothing more to be done.

I learned from the veterinarian, however, that it is almost impossible for iguanas to choke to death. An iguana's trachea is rather far forward, just behind the tongue, and its entrance is raised a few millimeters above the surface of the mouth. The vet confirmed by intubation that the trachea was not obstructed by food particles.

The most likely cause of death, I believe, is acute bronchospasm (asthma) triggered by an allergic reaction to a particular food item—in this case, T-Rex Iguana Dry Formula (Adult Vegi). I had been feeding small amounts of this commercial formula for more than a year, usually in combination with fresh food, but in retrospect, I do recall much milder episodes of what looked like choking behavior after some feedings.

Interestingly, report of a similar fatal reaction after feeding pasta to a pet iguana recently appeared on the Internet (rec.pets.herp). Since wheat is a major ingredient of both pasta and the T-Rex food, the most likely cause of death in both cases is wheat-induced allergic bronchospasm. In humans, there are reports in the medical literature of asthma-like symptoms, or even potentially fatal anaphylactic reactions, related to consumption of foods containing wheat. This is thought to be due to allergic hypersensitivity to the protein gluten, the major protein constituent of wheat. Anaphylactic reactions typically begin with bronchospasm and respiratory distress (similar to asthma) and can proceed to shock and death if untreated. Gluten also provokes in certain people a syndrome of

GI upset called “non-tropical sprue” that is thought to be immune-mediated.

I am unaware of any data on prevalence of wheat allergy in iguanas, but the anecdotal occurrence of two similar cases in the past week would suggest that it may not be uncommon. Of course, T-Rex commercial formula is not necessarily harmful for iguanas that are not allergic to wheat. But iguana owners may want to watch carefully for signs of respiratory distress after introducing any new food item, especially a commercial formula or other food containing wheat.

David K. Welsh

Harvard Medical School

welsh@helix.mgh.harvard.edu

Related references:

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Hey!

I'm getting your magazine for a year. I'd like to say it's very interesting and instructive. I like it very much.

I've got a small problem about it—the green iguanas. When they are in the nesting season I give them a box with a small amount of sand in it. They know why this box is so they put the eggs into it. But there is a problem. Why are they scratching all around the eggs right after nesting and damage the egg shells? Everywhere is written the best way is to remove the eggs immediately, but I can't do it always.

And there is another thing. Is it necessary to disinfect the eggs when you put them on hatching? And how to do it? Can the temperature oscillate and if it can, how much? Thank you for the answers.

Your sincerely,

Simon Krasovec

Slovenia

Editor's note: 1) Putting a smaller box within the box, or filling box with some burlap might provide female with a nesting medium which might cushion the eggs. 2) She is attempting to bury the eggs. Removing the eggs immediately after the female lays will prevent damage to the eggs. 3) Do not disinfect the eggs. The temperature can fluctuate between 83°–90° F during a daily cycle.