



Introduction to Chameleon Care

Melissa Magnuson DVM

Veiled chameleons are an incredibly beautiful species of reptile known for their unique coloration and patterning. Although it is merely a myth that they can blend into your walls, they do use their coloration to communicate their mood and health. The veiled chameleon has grown the most in popularity in the wonderful world of exotic pets. They are native to Yemen but are now quite invasive in Florida and Hawaii.

Housing

Veiled chameleons can grow anywhere from 10" to 18" and are arboreal, meaning that they primarily live in trees and high spaces. Veiled chameleons need a well-ventilated enclosure that is at least 24 inches wide, 24 inches long, and 36 inches high (24"x24"x36"), although they will always benefit from having more space. There are many options for enclosures, such as screen enclosures, hybrid enclosures, and glass enclosures. If a glass enclosure is being used, ventilation is very important. Hybrid enclosures help to hold in humidity to an extent while also allowing for airflow. Full-screen enclosures allow for excellent airflow but may require more upkeep to provide your chameleon with adequate humidity and hydration.

Veiled chameleons require a variety of branches, cork bark, vines, and live plants to explore and climb. You should provide your chameleon with an open basking area on one half of the enclosure approximately 10" away from the heat source (the bulb should be no closer than 6-8" from the top of your chameleon's casque while they are basking). This should lead into a "forest edge" portion of the enclosure, which will provide your chameleon a space to hide. Live plants



(such as big healthy philodendron or pothos) make the best hiding places! You'll need to place perches behind these plants to allow your chameleon to climb behind them. If chameleons do not have adequate hiding places, they will become stressed and this can impair their health.

A substrate is not necessary to keep your chameleon healthy, especially due to the risk of bacteria growth in a moist environment. It is recommended that you use bare-bottom, paper towels, or newspaper in the enclosure. These will be the easiest to clean.

Temperature & Lighting

Veiled chameleons do very well with their temperatures in the 70s, which is why they can do very well in screened or hybrid enclosures. The basking spot (the hottest spot in the tank closest to the heat lamp) should reach 80–85 degrees Fahrenheit, while the ambient temperature in the enclosure should stay in the 70s. These temperatures can be met using a daytime basking bulb above the open, basking portion of the enclosure. Chameleons are excellent climbers so they are at high risk for contact burns. It is highly recommended that you suspend the basking bulb above the enclosure rather than leave it sitting on the surface. We always recommend using a dimmer on your basking bulb so that you have better control of the heat being emitted. At night, the temperature can safely decrease to mid 55–60 degrees. Do not give your chameleon a red night heat lamp.

Chameleons need UVB lighting during the day. We recommend the following sources:

- Arcadia 6% bulbs if you are going to be placing the bulb directly on the screen top.
- Arcadia 12% linear bulbs if it is going to be suspended 6 inches above the enclosure.

Linear bulbs (such as the Arcadia UVB T5) tend to have a longer-lasting, higher UVB output than the coil (or compact) bulbs. Compact bulbs should be replaced every 3–6 months and linear bulbs should be replaced every 8–10 months, regardless of whether they are emitting visible light. ALWAYS USE A RELIABLE THERMOMETER IN YOUR ENCLOSURE (Infrared heat guns are a great tool to get temperature readings of multiple areas in the enclosure).

Humidity & Hydration

Despite popular belief, chameleons only need a humidity of approximately 40–50% during the day, with higher nighttime humidity of around 80%. You should always mist your chameleon with water in the early morning and at night. Utilizing a fogger or humidifier at night will benefit your chameleon greatly. It is incredibly important for your chameleon to have dry surfaces to climb on during the day, as constant moisture can cause bacterial or fungal infections in their feet. You should provide your chameleon with a water dripper during the day, with a bowl underneath that is large enough to hold the volume of the dripper. This should

be changed out daily. Your chameleon will drink from the water droplets if they get thirsty and it is highly unlikely that they will utilize a water dish.

Diet

Common health issues in chameleons are caused by incorrect feeding schedules and nutrition. Obesity and vitamin deficiencies are common problems caused by dietary issues. Hatchling chameleons should be fed daily, as much as they are willing to eat. This is typically acceptable until they are 6-9 months of age, depending on how quickly they have grown. Adult (full-grown) chameleons should only eat 3-5 food items that are no larger than the space between their eyes every other day. Adequate food items are dubia roaches, crickets, silkworms, tomato hornworms (captive-bred only), and black soldier fly larvae. Insects should always be "gut-loaded" with commercial insect diets or fresh vegetables and bee pollen. Your chameleon's insects should be dusted with calcium (WITHOUT vitamin D3) at every feeding. Approximately every 2 weeks, your chameleon should have feeders dusted with a calcium supplement containing vitamin D3 and Vitamin A. There are a few options available, but the ones that offer the D3:A ratio are going to be Arcadia RevitaliseD3, Repashy Calcium Plus LoD, Repashy Calcium Plus, and ReptiVite with D3.

Note: Dietary supplementation is key to keeping your chameleon healthy.

Handling

Chameleons can stress easily so it's important to keep handling to a minimum. Keep in mind that it is incredibly important for your chameleon to have the option to hide. When they are handled for extended periods of time, they can feel vulnerable. When you handle your chameleon, be sure to do so with great care. They have sharp nails that they'll use to hold on to you, but it's important that you do not trim them because they are climbers. It is a sign of stress if you observe your chameleon "color up" when you pick them up. Chameleons are an incredible, beautiful species, and much prefer to be left alone.

Salmonella

Any reptile may be carrying salmonella, even when they are perfectly healthy. Many reptiles are persistently infected. This means that they harbor the bacteria in their body at all times, and shed the bacteria into the environment when stressed. The most common sources of stress are inappropriate habitats and poor diet. It is safest to assume that your reptile is always shedding salmonella. Always wash your hands after handling. It is especially important to supervise small children. Children and immunocompromised individuals are at most risk for serious illness from salmonella infection.

Other Illness

Most diseases in chameleons result from dirty enclosures, poor diets, and cool temperatures. Proper care of your chameleon will greatly reduce the incidence of disease. Diseases in chameleons often come on very slowly, so it can be difficult to detect these diseases before they become advanced.

Knowing what is normal for your chameleon is very important. Become familiar with your chameleon's normal appetite, activity level, amount and frequency of urination and defecation, the appearance of waste products, and the general appearance of your reptile. A change in one of these normal parameters may be a sign of disease. If you notice a change in your chameleon, observe him very closely. If the signs or symptoms persist for one or two days, or you notice new signs/symptoms, please call us for an appointment. The sooner we are able to address a problem, the more successful we will be in treating it.

Signs that may indicate a medical emergency include bloody waste products, heavy breathing or panting, seizures, bloody discharges, and lameness. Call us immediately if you notice any of the above.

Preventive Care

We recommend a yearly physical examination for your chameleon to be sure he is healthy. The signs of poor health in chameleons can be subtle and if they are not recognized early, it can be too late to successfully treat a problem.

These are the most recent guidelines and we are learning more about these species every year. These are based on current veterinary research as well as observations of these species in captivity.

For more information, we recommend:

[Chameleonacademy.com/veiled-chameleon-care/](http://www.chameleonacademy.com/veiled-chameleon-care/)
<http://www.exoticpetvet.com/veiled-chameleon-care.html>