# Introduction to Blue-Tongued Skink Care

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

Blue-tongued skinks are mild-mannered, ground-dwelling lizards native to the semi-desert and open woodland regions of Australia, New Guinea, and Tasmania. They are well known for their distinctive blue tongues, social nature, and engaging personalities.

Blue-tongued skinks are generally docile, easy to handle in captivity, and can live up to 30 years with proper care. Their longevity makes correct husbandry especially important from the start.

## Housing

Blue-tongued skinks are not good climbers, so horizontal space is far more important than height.

### Enclosure Size

- Minimum size: 55-gallon enclosure
- Larger enclosures are always better
- Skinks should be housed alone, as they may fight if kept together
- A sturdy mesh or ventilated top is required

### Hides and Enrichment

Skinks do not need elaborate décor, but they do need security and enrichment:

- Provide at least two hiding places, one on each end of the enclosure
- Rounded cork bark slabs make excellent hides
- Cylindrical hides such as PVC pipes are often well-accepted
- A humid hide filled with damp sphagnum moss should always be available to assist with shedding

Although skinks are ground-dwelling, many enjoy exploring low branches and logs. Providing varied textures and levels encourages natural movement and improves overall well-being. Avoid overcrowding the enclosure.

### Substrate

Recommended substrates:

- Paper products
- Reptile carpeting

These materials are safe, inexpensive, and easy to clean.

**Do NOT use:**

- ✗ Corncob
- ✗ Wood shavings
- ✗ Reptile bark
- ✗ Sand or gravel

These substrates can be ingested and cause intestinal impaction, may harbor bacteria and fungi, and can irritate the respiratory system.

## Cleaning and Sanitation

- Remove uneaten food daily
- Clean and disinfect the enclosure at least weekly
- Use mild soap followed by a disinfectant solution (1 capful bleach to 1 gallon of water)
- Rinse thoroughly and dry completely before returning your skink

Commercial reptile disinfectants may also be used according to label directions.

## Lighting and Heat

### UVB Lighting

Blue-tongued skinks require UVA/UVB lighting for 10–12 hours daily, year-round.

Without adequate UVB exposure, skinks can develop:

- Loss of bone density
- Weakness and fractures
- Metabolic bone disease

UVB bulbs stop producing effective UV long before visible light burns out.

- Replace UVB bulbs every 6 months
- Date bulbs when installed

UVB bulbs do not produce heat and must be paired with a separate heat source.

### Temperature Gradient

Different skink species have slightly different preferences, but general guidelines are:

- Cool side: ~75°F
- Warm side: ~88°F
- Basking area: 90–95°F
- Night temperatures: may drop to 70–75°F

A heat lamp should be placed over one end of the enclosure to create a temperature gradient. Choose bulb wattage carefully to achieve proper temperatures.

Under-tank heaters may be used to gently raise ambient temperature but must be on a thermostat or rheostat. Because skinks burrow, there is an increased risk of thermal burns if heat pads are used without a protective barrier.

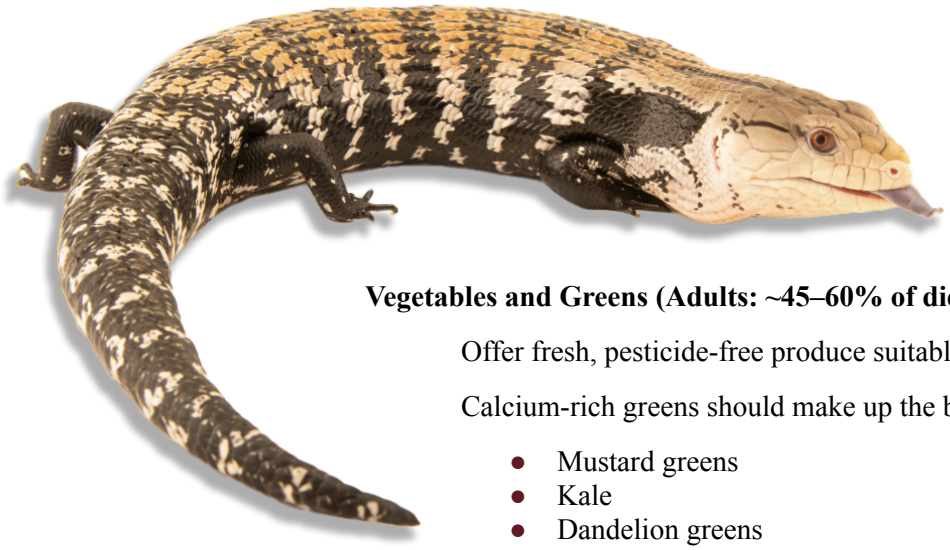
Place thermometers at ground level on both sides of the enclosure to monitor temperatures accurately.

## Diet

Blue-tongued skinks are omnivores and require a balanced diet of protein and plant material.

### Feeding Schedule

- Feed every other day



**Vegetables and Greens (Adults: ~45–60% of diet)**

Offer fresh, pesticide-free produce suitable for human consumption.

Calcium-rich greens should make up the bulk:

- Mustard greens
- Kale
- Dandelion greens
- Collard greens

Additional vegetables:

- Peas, green beans, corn
- Squash, carrots, sweet potato
- Cucumber, zucchini
- Bell peppers
- Parsley

Juveniles prefer finely chopped food; adults prefer coarser pieces.

**Protein**

Protein should make up:

- ~50% of the diet for juveniles
- Less for adults as they mature

Protein sources include:

- Crickets (gut-loaded)
- Mealworms
- King worms
- Snails
- Pinky mice

Waxworms are high in fat and should be fed only as occasional treats.

Insects should be no larger than the distance between the skink's eyes. Remove uneaten insects after 10 minutes.

**Supplements**

- Calcium supplement without phosphorus or vitamin D: twice weekly
- Insects should be gut-loaded prior to feeding

**Fruit and Treats**

Fruit should make up no more than 5–10% of the diet.

- Melons
- Berries,

- Apples
- Pears
- Peaches
- Grapes
- Plums

Edible flowers such as hibiscus, dandelion, and nasturtium may be offered occasionally.

**Avoid:**

- ❌ Avocado
- ❌ Eggplant
- ❌ Rhubarb
- ❌ high-sodium foods

**Water**

- Fresh water must be available at all times
- Use a shallow, sturdy bowl that cannot tip
- The dish should be large enough for full-body soaking, which helps with shedding
- Water should be changed daily
- Disinfect the water dish at least weekly, as skinks often defecate in it

## Handling

Allow new skinks several days to acclimate before handling.

- Begin handling once eating regularly
- Limit early sessions to 10 minutes or less
- Handle over a soft surface or close to the floor
- Support the body fully at all times
- Never grab a skink by the tail—tail injury can occur and regeneration is poor
- Limit handling duration, as skinks cannot regulate body temperature outside their enclosure

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Common Medical Problems

Nutritional Secondary Hyperparathyroidism (NSHP)

- Seen in juveniles with inadequate calcium or UVB
- Early signs include tail kinks and spinal deformities

Parasites

- Amoebas and flagellates are common
- Twice yearly fecal testing is recommended

Respiratory Disease

- Sneezing, nasal discharge, open-mouth breathing
- Requires prompt veterinary care
- Can be associated with poor humidity control, recommendation is 50% humidity

Stomatitis

- Infection of the mouth and gums
- Often related to diet or poor hygiene
- Veterinary treatment is required

Dysecdysis (Retained Shed)

- Common on toes and tail tips
- Prevented with proper humidity and vitamin-A-rich vegetables
- Repeated retained sheds can cause loss of circulation and tissue damage

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Preventive Care

- Juveniles: twice-yearly exams
- Adults: annual exams

Recommended annual testing:

- Bloodwork to assess calcium and phosphorus levels
- Fecal testing for parasites

Signs of illness in skinks can be subtle, and early detection significantly improves outcomes.

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Final Note

Blue-tongued skinks are intelligent, personable lizards with long lifespans. A proper diet, correct lighting, and routine veterinary care are essential to keeping them healthy for decades.

# Ferguson Zones:
# Matching UVB to Your Reptile

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

## Zone 1: Crepuscular or Shade Dwellers

**Very low UVB exposure**

These species spend most of their time in shade, dense cover, or are active at dawn and dusk. They receive little direct sunlight in the wild.

**Examples:**

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- Crested geckos
- Gargoyle geckos
- African fat-tailed geckos
- Corn snakes
- Ball pythons

**Key point for owners:**
These species still benefit from **low-level UVB**, but excessive UVB can be harmful.

## Zone 2: Partial Sun or Occasional Baskers

**Low to moderate UVB exposure**

These reptiles move between shade and sunlight and bask intermittently rather than continuously.

**Examples:**

- (juveniles and non-dominant adults often fall here)
- Blue-tongue skinks
- Uromastyx (when not actively basking)
- Green anoles
- Some box turtles

**Key point for owners:**
UVB should be available, but animals must always have shaded areas to self-regulate exposure.

## Zone 3: Open or Partial Sun Baskers

**Moderate to high UVB exposure**

These reptiles bask regularly and are adapted to brighter environments, but still retreat to shade.

**Examples:**

- Adult bearded dragons
- Veiled chameleons
- Panther chameleons
- Red-eared sliders and other basking aquatic turtles
- Spiny-tailed lizards

**Key point for owners:**
These species **require reliable UVB** to remain healthy and are at high risk for metabolic bone disease without it.

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## Zone 4: Full Sun Baskers

**High UVB exposure**

These reptiles live in very bright, open environments and bask for prolonged periods under intense sunlight.

**Examples:**

- Uromastyx species
- Desert tortoises
- Sulcata tortoises
- Rock agamas

**Key point for owners:**
Strong UVB is essential, but enclosure setup must still allow distance and shade to prevent overexposure.

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## Important Reminder for Clients

These zones are **general guidelines**, not rigid rules.
Factors that influence UVB needs include:

- Species
- Age
- Behavior
- Enclosure design
- Distance from the bulb
- Screen tops and materials

**Always research species-specific needs before acquiring a reptile**, and consult a veterinarian experienced in reptile medicine to confirm proper lighting for your individual pet.

# Reptile Lighting: Why It Matters

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

Proper lighting is one of the most important parts of reptile care, yet it is also one of the most misunderstood. Inadequate lighting is a leading cause of metabolic bone disease and other serious health problems in reptiles.

This handout explains what ultraviolet (UV) lighting is, why reptiles need it, and how to choose and maintain the correct lighting for your pet.

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## Understanding UV Light

Ultraviolet (UV) light is radiation that exists beyond the visible light spectrum. It comes in three forms:

- **UVA**
- **UVB**
- **UVC**

Only UVA and UVB are relevant and safe for reptiles.

**UVA**

- Helps regulate daily biological rhythms and behavior
- Important for normal activity, appetite, and reproduction

**UVB (Most Critical)**

- Essential for calcium metabolism
- Allows reptiles to properly absorb calcium from their diet
- Prevents metabolic bone disease, a painful and often fatal condition

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## How UVB Works in the Body

UVB light activates vitamin D precursors in the skin, allowing reptiles to produce vitamin D3 naturally. Vitamin D3 is required for calcium to move from the gut into the bloodstream and into bones.

Research shows that:

- **Naturally produced vitamin D3** (via UVB exposure) is safer and more effective than oral supplementation in diurnal (day-active) reptiles
- **Some nocturnal species**, such as leopard geckos and corn snakes, can also benefit from low-level UVB exposure

## Sunlight vs Indoor Lighting

Reptiles living outdoors receive UVB directly from the sun.

However:

- UVB does NOT pass through glass
- Placing a reptile near a window does not provide UVB

Indoor reptiles must be provided with artificial UVB lighting using bulbs specifically designed for reptiles.

## Choosing the Right UVB Bulb

High-quality reptile UVB bulbs are essential. Brands commonly recommended include:

- Zoo Med
- Arcadia
- Reptisun

The type and strength of bulb needed depends on the species and natural habitat of your reptile.

## Ferguson Zones: Matching UVB to Your Reptile

Reptiles are grouped into **Ferguson Zones** based on how much sunlight they naturally receive in the wild:

- **Zone 1:** Crepuscular or shade dwellers
- **Zone 2:** Partial sun or occasional baskers
- **Zone 3:** Open or partial sun baskers
- **Zone 4:** Full sun baskers

Knowing your reptile's Ferguson Zone helps determine:

- UVB intensity
- Bulb type
- Distance from the basking area

Ask your veterinarian if you are unsure which zone your reptile falls into.

## Proper Placement of UVB Lighting

Correct placement is just as important as the bulb itself.

**Fluorescent UVB Bulbs**

- Reptile should be able to get within 12–18 inches of the bulb
- Use branches or logs to allow climbing closer if needed

**Mercury Vapor Bulbs**

- Must be placed at least 12 inches from the basking area
- These bulbs produce both heat and UVB and can overheat reptiles if too close

**Screen Tops Matter**

- Dense screen lids can block up to 50% of UVB
- Enclosures with heavy screening may require stronger bulbs or multiple fixtures

**Measuring UVB**

- Solar meters can be used to accurately measure UVB output and ensure proper exposure

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## Bulb Replacement Schedule

UVB bulbs must be replaced regularly, even if they still look bright.

- Replace every 6–12 months, depending on the bulb model
- UVB output declines long before visible light burns out
- Date bulbs when installed to track replacement timing

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## Key Takeaways for Reptile Owners

- UVB lighting is essential for bone health and calcium metabolism
- Windows do not provide usable UVB
- Proper bulb type, placement, and replacement are critical
- UVB needs vary by species and natural habitat
- When in doubt, ask your veterinarian for guidance

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If you need help selecting the correct lighting for your reptile or want your setup reviewed, please contact your veterinary team. Proper lighting is one of the most powerful tools you have to keep your reptile healthy.