

Waking Mediterranean tortoises from hibernation

When tortoises awaken from hibernation they will be in a debilitated state. It is critically important that we follow a few simple steps to speed up their recovery and get them back to good health.

Tortoises generally should not be hibernated for more than 20 weeks. Therefore tortoises which went into hibernation in late October early November should be waking up around the end of February early March. Once animals begin to stir they must be woken up.

During hibernation at temperatures of 4-6°C tortoises should only lose about 1% of their body weight per month. As temperatures rise they begin to burn off a much higher percentage of weight. It is at this time that they have the lowest reserves and cannot afford to lose much more. Leaving tortoises in hibernation for extended periods of time will usually lead to sickness or even death.

If your tortoise has not woken up by itself and has been in hibernation for 20 weeks then the animal should be gently woken up. Tortoises hibernate because temperatures drop to low for them to be active. To wake your tortoise you should bring its hibernation box indoors and place it in a warm room (Approximately 15-18°C). Within a few hours your tortoise should begin to stir, once it opens its eyes and seems aware of its surroundings you should be ready to begin the process of recovery.

1) Heat

Tortoises are cold blooded reptiles (or technically ectothermic animals). This means they have no ability to control their body temperature internally and are reliant on the sun's warmth for body heat. When tortoises emerge from hibernation in their natural habitat they have access to Mediterranean temperatures. In England however the temperature in the spring is usually much cooler so tortoises kept in captivity here require a heat source to boost their body temperature. This access to heat kick starts the animals' metabolism enabling the tortoise to feed, drink and recover from hibernation.

Many people who own tortoises are often concerned about the expense of providing tortoises with heat after hibernation. In fact this only needs to be a simple set up, such as a bedside reflector lamp capable of holding a 60-100w spot lamp. Position the lamp about 25-35cm (10-15 inches) above the tortoise, make sure it is very secure and cannot be knocked over. You must also ensure the tortoise can easily avoid the heat of the bulb at anytime. It would be advisable to put the lamp on a timer and give the tortoise between 6-10 hours of heat per day.

2) Re-hydrate

Fluids are vitally important to tortoises that have recently awoken. It is recommended that they be soaked in a shallow bath of lukewarm water for 10-15 minutes per day for the first week to fortnight after waking up. Tortoises generally drink better if they are bathed rather than providing a water bowl. I would use an old clean washing up bowl or a small new cat litter tray. Always warm the water up to a temperature of around 22-24°C.

Bathing stimulates your tortoise not only to drink but also to urinate. Urination is vital for a tortoise to rid itself of all the toxins built up during hibernation. The sooner these are passed the better.

3) **Feed**

A healthy tortoise should begin to feed within 24 hours of waking up. Many tortoises refuse to feed for several weeks after hibernation, this is usually due to owners neglecting to provide an adequate heat source.

Heat, after hibernation, kick starts a tortoise's metabolism. The animals liver converts stored glycogen into glucose. This glucose pores into the bloodstream counter acting the affect of toxins in the blood, giving the tortoise valuable energy to begin foraging and feeding.

To begin with offer your tortoise the foods it most likes. Foods with high water contents usually go down well, things like tomato, cucumber and salad leaves. Always add a good calcium vitamin supplement at this time since blood calcium levels are low and will need topping up.

Once tortoises are feeding well provide a more natural diet. Mediterranean tortoises require a diet high in calcium and fibre and low in protein and sugar. Edible weeds such as dandelions, clover, plantain, chickweed, and fresh bramble leaves are suitable, again add calcium and vitamins supplements.

Tortoises that have awoken and not started feeding within a couple of days can be given glucose orally by a vet, this will usually start the ball rolling.

As the spring progresses and day time temperatures increase tortoises can go outdoors in their usual accommodation during the day. Once night time temperatures stabilize at 10°C they can stay outside with access to a dry shelter for the evening.

Tortoises which refuse to feed, drink or urinate should be taken to a vet as soon as possible.

In short – Once tortoises emerge from hibernation:-

- 1) Provide with heat in the form of a heat lamp.
- 2) Re-hydrate, by bathing daily for 10-15 minutes at a time.
- 3) Provide food within 24 hours.

The Norfolk and Coe tortoise Club seeks to ensure that information contained in these pages is accurate. However, no liability or responsibility is accepted arising from reliance upon the information contained in this care sheet.