

Turtles as Pets: Basic Care of Australian Freshwater Turtles



“There’s something you should know at the outset:
turtles are not low-maintenance pets.”

Which Species?

Pet turtles depend on their owners for food, protection and shelter. Before deciding to own a pet turtle, think carefully about all the things you will have to do to care for your pet responsibly, including regular vet check-ups, food and shelter.

The main species of turtles kept as pets in Australia are the long-necked turtles such as the Eastern Long-neck Turtle, *Chelodina longicollis* (one of the easiest turtles to keep) and the short-necked turtles such as Murray River Turtle, *Emydura macquarii macquarii*. More stringent permit conditions normally apply to keeping the Broad-shelled Turtle, *C. expansa*.

In Australia, you are not allowed by law to catch any animal from the wild and make it a pet. Nor are you allowed to release a pet animal to the wild. If it out grows its home or your circumstances change and you can no longer care for the turtle contact an organisation like Turtles Australia Inc. (In some circumstances our organisation may be able to assist with the re-homing of turtles.)

It is best to source a turtle as a pet from a specialist pet shop who deals in turtles. They will tell you if you need a licence to keep the kind of turtle you choose, and if so, they will tell you how to get one. A specialist pet shop is also the best place to buy your turtle food.

Turtles are fascinating creatures and can make great pets provided their care needs are met.

Housing

Before buying a turtle, prepare a home for it. You will need an aquarium or pond to house your turtle. The basic rule is “the bigger the better”. Remember that turtles grow in size with *C. longicollis* attaining 26 cm shell length and *E. macquarii* 34 cm.

- The water depth should be at least twice the length of the shell (i.e. a shell length of 15cm = water depth of 30cm)

- The substrate (e.g. sand/gravel) should be large enough that the turtle can't accidentally swallow it, or for ease of cleaning the bottom may be left bare.
- The turtle will need an area out of the water for basking. This area should be large enough for the turtle to move around on and be easily accessible for the turtle (e.g. by use of a ramp/log).

Example of **indoor housing** for your turtle

“An aquarium about one metre long will be fine for small turtles. Because turtles need an area for basking (as opposed to busking), you can slope the bottom using aquarium gravel, add smooth, flat rocks or bricks or buy a purpose-built turtle ramp. Just as long as you make it easy for your turtle to get out of the water; turtles are not noted for their jumping ability. The water should be deeper than your turtle is wide so that it can roll over without getting caught.”

Ref: Pitt Water Animal Hospital website <https://pittwateranimalhospital.com.au/turtles/>



Example of **outdoor housing** for your turtle (Image: Pinterest website)



Lighting

Turtles need approximately 20-30 minutes of natural, unfiltered sunlight 2 – 3 times a week. (not through glass or plastic). A shallow container with a little water is good for this - make sure they don't overheat. They use the UVB rays to produce Vitamin D3, which is essential for proper calcium metabolism.

A UV light may be used, however, the UVB emissions from these lights fall after 3-6 months, so will need to be replaced frequently.

Heating

An aquarium heater will be needed to keep the water between 20 & 28 degrees. You will also need an aquarium thermometer to keep a check on this.

During winter, the basking area will also need to be heated to the appropriate temp for your species.

Water Quality

If using tap water to fill the tank, an aquarium water conditioner will need to be used to remove the Chlorine-based disinfectants that are added to most domestic water supplies.

Keeping the water quality good is vitally important to the health of your turtle; the cause of most illnesses in captive turtles can be traced back to poor water quality.

The aquarium will need a biological filter system. A 25% water change once a week is recommended.

You will also need to test the pH of the water regularly. The aquarium water should have a pH of 7 - 8.4 which is neutral to slightly alkaline.

Feeding

Long-necked turtles are carnivorous and will eat insects (e.g. moths and crickets), tadpoles, small freshwater fish (e.g. white bait and guppies), fresh and saltwater prawns and yabbies, snails and mussels and worms. Any saltwater feed should be rinsed thoroughly and soaked for at least an hour. They also eat carrion which makes this species easier to keep in captivity (John Cann).

Short-necked turtles are omnivores. They are scavengers and grazers and eat a more varied diet. Feed as for the long-neck turtle but also offer vegetables and fruits such as spinach, broccoli, cabbage, pumpkin, parsley, apples, pears and stone fruits. You can also give some native freshwater plants such as Duckweed, Ribbon Weed and Nardoo.

Note that turtles need to be submerged to feed. Turtles will readily over-eat and are known to eat the 'wrong' foods if available to them. They will also pick their favourite out of a mixed feed and leave the rest if given the opportunity.

How much to feed?

The meal should be about the size of the turtles head.

How often to feed?

An adult should be fed about twice a week, every 2 days for juveniles. Remove any uneaten food after a couple of hours. You can feed the turtle in a separate container with water if needed to keep the tank cleaner as turtles feed in the water.



Acknowledgement: the information supplied is from the following references:

1. <https://www.kidcyber.com.au/pet-turtles>
2. Freshwater Turtles: a wild Australia guide, John Cann, Steve Parish Publishing 2008
3. Caring-for-Australian-FW-Turtles-in-Captivity-Links.pdf
4. <https://pittwateranimalhospital.com.au/turtles/>
5. Pinterest website images