

# Hibernation

DO NOT HIBERNATE YOUR TORTOISE WITHIN THE FIRST 12 MONTHS OF OWNERSHIP,  
REGARDLESS OF AGE!

The breeds of tortoise that hibernate do so for health reasons. Irregular hibernation will adversely affect the tortoise's health and lifespan. Most Mediterranean breeds are biologically set to hibernate for a period of time; it is unnatural for tortoises to be awake and eating 365 days a year.

You cannot trick Mother Nature without consequences; if your tortoise is awake every winter, the increased food intake can lead to abnormal growth and in turn cause Metabolic Bone Disease, lumpy shells and sometimes even kidney and bladder stones.

The positives of hibernation far outweigh the negatives!

## Dos and Don'ts of Hibernation

### Do;

- Make a chart for your tortoise's toilet habits. You do not want to see a poo for at least 7 days before hibernation
- Keep a thermometer in the fridge to ensure the temperature always stays between 2 and 5 degrees celsius
- Worm your tortoise at least a month before the wind down
- Only use soil in your inner plastic box. DO NOT use hay or straw. Soil is the only thing that will regulate your tortoise's body temperature
- Put air holes in all boxes

### Don't;

- Hibernate your tortoise until you have owned it for 12 months (wait for the following winter)
- Assume your tortoise is hibernating if it is asleep inside its nice warm house. They need a certain temperature to hibernate and room temperature is far too warm
- Feed your tortoise prior to hibernation (see wind down process for more information)
- Hibernate an ill tortoise

## Step 1 - Preparing Boxes and the Fridge

Fridge hibernation is the most controlled method and the safest. It is important to have everything ready before your tortoise finishes the wind down.

Before winding down your tortoise, ensure that your fridge sits at a steady temperature between 2 and 5 degrees celsius. Small fluctuations are of no concern so long as they stay within this parameter. You will need a thermometer in the fridge throughout your tortoise's hibernation.

To begin with you will need a plastic tub, big enough for the tortoise to turn around in, and a cardboard box. Make sure there is enough room in the cardboard box to put your plastic box in and still have space around the plastic box. Make sure all boxes have air holes in them.

Once your tortoise's wind down is complete you need to fill your plastic tub half way with top soil. This then goes in the cardboard box surrounded by shredded paper. Close all boxes up with an elastic band and place your tortoise in the fridge.

## Step 2 - The Wind Down

Wind down timescales;

- 14 - 20 days for tortoises ages between 1-3 years
- 21 - 28 days for tortoises older than 4 years

These timescales must be followed according to your tortoise's age, not how long you have had the tortoise.

These timescales are for the starvation period This is the amount of time that you **will not** offer your tortoise any food at all. During this time, you should give your tortoise a warm bath for 10-20 minutes **every day** and reduce your lamp time by an hour each day. By the last week of the wind down, you should not be turning your lamp on at all.

Once you are certain your tortoise has not done a poo for **7 consecutive days**, you can follow the boxing up instructions and start your hibernation.

Note: it is not the end of the world if your tortoise poos in the last 7 days. You just need to extend the wind down time, bath your tortoise twice a day and make sure the tortoise is in a cool room.

Regular pooing after the complete wind down time can indicate that your tortoise is eating the substrate. If you see this occurring or have your suspicions it is happening, you should remove ALL substrate from the tortoise table.

## Step 3 - Hibernation

Hibernation only occurs when the temperature is between 2 and 5 degrees celsius. Noise will not wake your tortoise from hibernation.

We aim for all tortoises to be awake by the start of April, however it can be earlier for shorter hibernations. Aim to hibernate your tortoise through the coldest winter months, rather than Autumn.

Hibernation timescales;

1st Year = 3 weeks

2nd Year = 6 weeks

3rd Year = 10 Weeks

4th Year = 16 weeks

5th Year and over = 22 weeks (these timescales can often be too long with our warmer Winters, so use your own judgement here)

This timescale is to be followed not by age, but by how many consecutive hibernations your tortoise has had since you became its owner. Do not assume an older tortoise that is said to be healthy can hibernate without monitoring the tortoise's health yourself for 12 months.

Do not hibernate any tortoise that you have not owned for 12 months or longer.

These hibernation guidelines should only be followed as guidelines, not fact. If your temperatures fluctuate too much, you can abandon hibernation, take them through the waking up procedure and put your tortoise back under its lamp.

Please ensure that your fridge is opened regularly for air flow.

Always check your thermometer's minimum and maximum temperatures to ensure there is no chance of your tortoise waking up.

A tortoise will wake up from hibernation if the temperature rises above 7 degrees celsius and will die if it drops below 0.

If your tortoise wakes from hibernation, it should be brought out, taken through the waking up procedure and then put back under its lamp and resume normal routines. Tortoises only have the energy to wake up from hibernation once, putting them back into hibernation can be fatal.

## Step 4 - Waking Up

When it comes to waking up, you'll be very excited to see your shelled friend again, but this needs to be a slow process.

Firstly, bring your tortoise out of the fridge. You can open the box if you can't wait to check on your little one, but your tortoise does need to be left in its box at room temperature for the first 30 minutes, to acclimatise.

Once your tortoise has started to wake up a little, it's time for their bath. Remember, we are bringing their temperature slowly, so just a lukewarm bath for now.

After 10-15 minutes in the bath, it is time to put your tortoise back in its tortoise table, with its lamp/s on.

You can start offering food as soon as you like, but remember, it is a big change for the digestive tract, so offer small amounts and don't be concerned if your tortoise doesn't want to eat within the first couple of days.

If your tortoise hasn't eaten within seven days of waking up after hibernation we suggest you seek advice from a reptile vet.