**YVCipedia REPTILES**

Monitor Lizard Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

**Monitor lizards** (*Varanus* spp.) are large, intelligent reptiles found across Africa, Asia, and Australia. This family includes more than 70 species ranging from the small **ackie monitor** (~2–3 feet) to massive **water monitors** or **Nile monitors** (>6 feet).

Monitors are highly intelligent, alert, and active reptiles that require **large, secure, and highly controlled environments**. With appropriate care, many species can live **10–20+ years**, though lifespans vary by species.

Prospective owners should be prepared for a **serious, long-term commitment** that includes substantial space, specialized heating and lighting, and safe handling practices.

## **Housing & Environment**

Housing needs vary dramatically by species but all monitors require **spacious enclosures with strong security**. These are **powerful, exploratory animals** that can push, dig, and climb.

**General recommendations:**

* **Enclosure size:** As large as possible. Adult monitors generally require enclosures at least **2–3× their full body length** in floor space, and tall species need vertical climbing opportunities. For example:
  + Ackie monitors: 6×3×3 ft minimum
  + Savannah monitors: 8×4×4 ft or larger
  + Water/Nile monitors: custom walk-in or outdoor pens
* **Construction:** Escape-proof, durable materials.
* **Substrate:** Deep layers (12–24+ inches) of soil/sand mixes for digging species.
* **Décor:** Logs, branches, rocks, caves.
* **Hides:** At least two secure hides on warm and cool sides.
* **Water:** Large water basin for soaking or swimming (especially for semi-aquatic species).

Spot-clean enclosures daily, remove waste promptly, and conduct thorough substrate changes or partial replacements regularly.

## **Heating, Lighting & Humidity**

Monitors are **ectothermic** and depend on their environment to regulate temperature. Proper heating and UVB are critical to avoid serious metabolic and digestive disorders.

**Temperature gradients:**

* **Basking area:** 110–130°F surface temperature (some species prefer even hotter).
* **Cool side:** 75–85°F.
* **Nighttime:** Can drop to ~70–75°F but should avoid prolonged cold.

**Heat sources:**

* Overhead halogen flood lamps or ceramic heat emitters controlled by thermostats or dimmers.
* Radiant heat panels for larger enclosures.
* Never use heat rocks (burn risk).

**UVB lighting:**

* High-output **T5 HO UVB (10–14%)** tubes recommended.
* Provide 12–14 hours of daylight, with UVB covering at least 2/3 of the enclosure.
* Replace bulbs every 6–12 months even if still bright.

**Humidity:**

* Varies by species: arid species (savannah monitors) ~30–50%; tropical species (water monitors) 60–80%.
* Achieved through substrate choice, misting, foggers, and large water features.
* Digital hygrometers recommended for accurate monitoring.

## **Water & Hydration**

Fresh, clean water is essential at all times.

* Provide a large, sturdy water dish that allows soaking if species-appropriate.
* Semi-aquatic species benefit from pools deep enough for swimming.
* Change water daily and disinfect regularly to prevent bacterial growth.

Proper hydration supports digestion, shedding, and overall health.

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Monitors are **carnivores or insectivores**, depending on species and age.

**Juveniles:**

* Primarily high-quality insects (dubia roaches, crickets, black soldier fly larvae)
* Small amounts of lean meats or fish for appropriate species
* Whole prey items (pinkies, fuzzies) introduced gradually

**Adults:**

* Larger whole prey (mice, rats, chicks, quail for suitable species)
* Insects remain important for smaller species like ackies
* Avoid exclusive rodent diets for savannah monitors—linked to obesity and liver disease

**Feeding schedule:**

* Juveniles: Daily to every other day
* Adults: 1–3× weekly depending on size, age, and species

**Supplements:**

* Calcium with D3: 1–2× weekly, especially for insectivores.
* Multivitamin: 1× weekly.

Always research **species-specific diet recommendations** to avoid nutritional imbalances.

## **Handling & Behavior**

Monitors are **highly intelligent** but often **strong, fast, and defensive if stressed**. Taming takes patience and respect.

* Always support the entire body firmly.
* Avoid sudden movements or grabbing from above.
* Build trust with slow, consistent interactions.
* Expect powerful claws and tails—they may scratch or whip if frightened.
* Never handle immediately after feeding (regurgitation risk).

Some monitors become calm and even interactive with regular gentle handling, while others remain wary. **Know your individual animal’s limits.**

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Schedule an **initial veterinary exam** soon after acquisition, and **annual checkups** to monitor health.

**Common health concerns include:**

* Metabolic bone disease (from inadequate UVB or calcium)
* Respiratory infections (from incorrect temperatures or humidity)
* Parasites (internal and external)
* Obesity or fatty liver (from overfeeding)
* Trauma from enclosure hazards or handling accidents

**Warning signs:**

* Lethargy or weakness
* Loss of appetite or weight loss
* Difficulty breathing or wheezing
* Swelling, pus, or sores in the mouth (stomatitis)
* Shedding problems
* Unusual aggression or withdrawal

Prompt veterinary care improves outcomes.

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

Monitors are **intelligent, active reptiles** that need mental and physical stimulation.

* Provide varied terrain with logs, rocks, and climbing structures.
* Deep substrate allows natural digging.
* Rotate hides and décor periodically to encourage exploration.
* Feeding enrichment: scatter feeding, puzzle feeders, varied prey items.
* Large enclosures with different microclimates reduce stress and promote natural behavior.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Monitors are among the **most intelligent reptiles**, capable of problem-solving and recognizing keepers.
* Many species can grow **over 4–6 feet long** and live **20+ years**.
* Their **forked tongues** help them “taste” their environment, like snakes.
* Some species are **incredible diggers**—deep substrate is essential.
* Water monitors are **strong swimmers**, while savannah monitors prefer **arid savanna habitats**.

### **Supplies & Care Checklist**

* Escape-proof, secure enclosure sized to adult monitor
* Deep, diggable substrate (soil/sand mix)
* Logs, rocks, branches for climbing
* Multiple hides on warm and cool sides
* High-output UVB lighting with appropriate fixtures
* Basking heat lamps or ceramic emitters on thermostats
* Large water basin or swimming area if species-appropriate
* Digital thermometers and hygrometers
* Feeding tongs, cleaning supplies
* Calcium with D3 and reptile multivitamin
* Appropriately sized frozen/thawed prey, insects
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*