

# HOW TO KEEP YOUR SULCATA TORTOISE HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE!

## Other Tips For a Happy, Healthy Sulcata Tortoise:

- Take a newly purchased sulcata tortoise to an exotic animal veterinarian for a wellness examination and fecal check for parasites.
- Quarantine new tortoises in a separate area for at least 30 days.
- Sulcatas must maintain a low-protein, low-fat, low-sugar diet.
- In order to properly hibernate, they must be provided with warm winter housing in temperate climates.
- Allow sulcatas to dig burrows in their outdoor enclosures, which is part of their natural behavior.
- Allow the tortoise to have access to water deep enough for soaking to maintain proper hydration.

## Outdoor Housing For Your Sulcata Tortoise Should:

- be warm and dry with exposure to natural sunlight
- be secure from predators, such as cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes and foxes
- contain shelter from environmental elements
- be escape proof, as they are good climbers and diggers

## Indoor Housing For Your Sulcata Tortoise Should:

- contain rabbit pellets, grass hay, paper towels or peat as a substrate
- include exposure to artificial UVB lighting and a basking spot for 10-12 hours a day
- allow as much floor space as possible with proper ventilation

## It is important for Sulcata Tortoises to avoid:

- free roam of the house
- hot rocks or direct contact with heating elements or light sources
- overabundance of food or feeding of inappropriate diet items
- cat or dog food of any kind and insects



## Most Common Disorders of Sulcata Tortoises

- Nutritional disorders (often resulting in metabolic bone disease, shell pyramiding and soft shell)
- Dehydration in hatchlings/juveniles
- Respiratory infections
- Kidney disease
- Bladder stones
- Shell infections
- Abscesses
- Injuries
- Ticks
- Intestinal parasites
- Diarrhea

Sulcata tortoises in captivity have often suffered premature death due to the family's lack of knowledge about their proper care. Visiting your reptile veterinarian for routine health checks and to check for parasites will help prevent many diseases and support you in having a long, satisfying relationship with your sulcata tortoise.

For help in finding a reptile veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians ([ARAV.org](http://ARAV.org)) or contact the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners ([ABVP.com/diplomate](http://ABVP.com/diplomate)).

## Additional Resources

*Sulcata and Leopard Tortoises (Complete Herp Care)* - E. J. Pirog

*Turtles of the World (Volume 3)* - Holger Vetter

*Leopard and African Spurred Tortoise: 'Stigmochelys pardalis and Centrochelys sulcata' (Chelonian Library, Volume 1)* - Holger Vetter

[chelonian.org](http://chelonian.org)

[turtletconservancy.org](http://turtletconservancy.org)



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## SULCATA TORTOISE

The African spurred or sulcata tortoise (*Centrochelys sulcata*) is the world's third largest tortoise and is native to the arid savannahs, scrublands and desert fringes of sub-Saharan Africa. Reaching an adult length of 2.5 feet and weighing 120 pounds or more, these tortoises require a substantial amount of space and need extensive outdoor and indoor accommodations. Although starting off as small adorable hatchlings, they grow very large and extremely heavy with needs that quickly surpass many keepers' expectations and abilities. In their natural habitat, these tortoises are vegetarians, feeding on grasses, shrubs and succulent plants. Their harsh environment is sparsely vegetated, and they have evolved to cope with a life where food and water are not plentiful. As a result, over-feeding and/or feeding inappropriate items in captivity are common causes of problems in this species. African spurred tortoises are extremely powerful animals and are quite fond of digging, necessitating sturdy, strong enclosures. They are solidly built with a broad flattened shell that is deeply indented between the scutes. The skin is thick golden yellow-brown, and the thighs are adorned with 2-3 large spurs. Despite the challenges of owning this magnificent giant, its outgoing and generally docile personality as well as its natural beauty have earned it great praise and popularity among tortoise keepers.

### What to Expect from Your Sulcata Tortoise

African spurred tortoises, also known as "sulcatas," are outgoing, inquisitive and active tortoises that are becoming increasingly popular in captivity. Most sulcatas are sold as tiny hatchlings that will easily fit in the palm of one's hand. However, these small pets quickly grow large, in fact, sulcatas are the third largest tortoise species in the world. Their long life span requires a substantial long-term commitment.

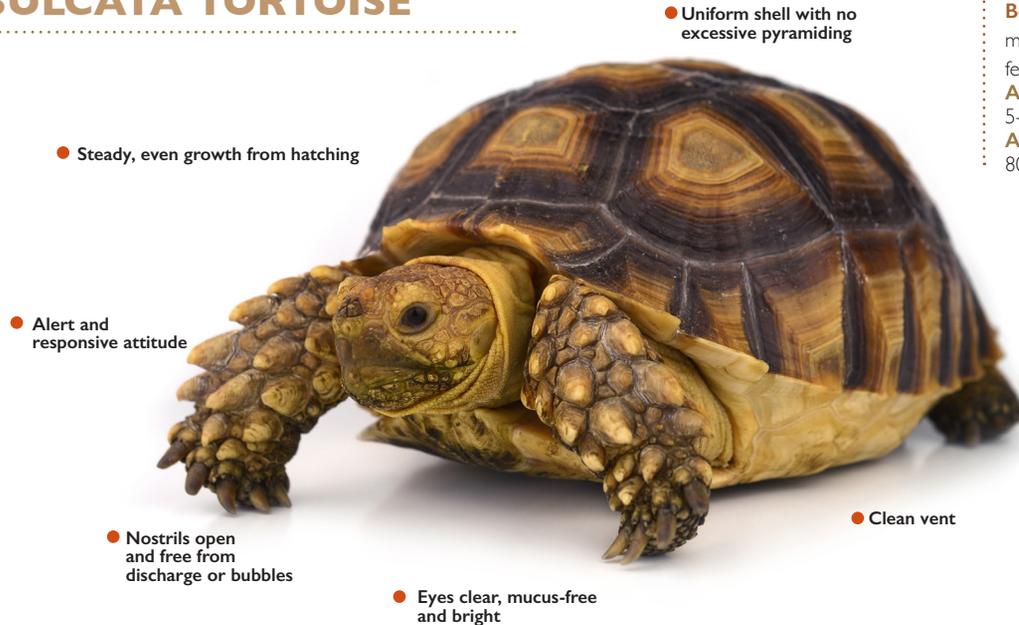
### Is Your Sulcata Tortoise a Male or Female?

As juveniles, there is little difference between male and female sulcatas. It is not until they reach 12-14 in (30-36 cm) in length (typically 3-4 years of age) that they begin to show physical differences in gender. In comparison to females, male sulcatas are larger, have a longer thicker tail that folds to the side, and a wider anal scute that is deeply divided. Additionally, males develop elongated gular scutes and a deep concavity to the plastron, which the females do not possess. Younger tortoises can be sexed by an experienced veterinarian with proper tools.

### What Should You Feed Your Sulcata Tortoise?

Sulcata tortoises are strict herbivores. In captivity they require a very high-fiber, low-protein, low-fat, low-sugar, grass-based diet to stay healthy. The best foods for a sulcata tortoise include mixed fresh grasses, grass hays (e.g., timothy, orchard grass), clover, dandelion, edible flowers and spineless *Opuntia* (prickly pear) cactus pads. A smaller part of the diet may consist of dark leafy greens (e.g., collard greens, kale, carrot tops, mustard greens, endive, watercress) and other vegetables. Excessive quantities of protein-rich vegetables (e.g., beans, peas) are not recommended. The exclusive use of commercially available pelleted diets for tortoises is controversial, but these may be used as a portion of sulcata diets. Adding calcium and vitamin supplements may

## WHAT YOUR VETERINARIAN LOOKS FOR IN A HEALTHY SULCATA TORTOISE



● Steady, even growth from hatching

● Alert and responsive attitude

● Nostrils open and free from discharge or bubbles

● Eyes clear, mucus-free and bright

● Clean vent

● Uniform shell with no excessive pyramiding



**NOTE:** Most, if not all, reptiles carry *Salmonella* bacteria in their intestinal tract and intermittently or continuously shed these bacteria in their feces, so they are unsuitable pets for very young children and those with compromised immune systems. Good hygiene must always be practiced around all reptiles, including Sulcata turtles. For more information, please see the [handout, Salmonella Information for Reptile Owners at http://arav.org/special-topics/](http://arav.org/special-topics/).



be beneficial in proper amounts (which should be discussed with your veterinarian). Foods containing animal-based proteins, such as dog/cat foods or insects, should be avoided. Fresh water should be available at all times. The water dish should be large enough to allow the tortoise to soak, with the water level up to the shell bridge and shallow enough to allow easy exit.

### Should Your Sulcata Tortoise Hibernate?

Sulcata tortoises do not hibernate, and the ideal housing for one of any age is located outdoors with natural sunlight and ventilation. For small and medium sulcatas (up to 12 in [30 cm]), a pen may be fashioned using railroad ties or posts to form a perimeter fence, with special attention to make it escape-proof, as sulcatas can burrow under fencing and can even push over inadequate fencing as they become adults. Adult sulcatas need a minimum of an 8 ft x 8 ft (2.4 m x 2.4 m) area per individual. Hiding shelters should be

available to provide shade and protection. A dry, heated area should be provided for nighttime and inclement weather. The substrate can be a sand/soil/peat mixture or a pesticide-free patch of lawn. In some areas, the top of the pen will need a secure covering to keep predators out to prevent predation or theft.

If an indoor enclosure must be used for a young sulcata, the best accommodation is a glass terrarium or plastic/polyethylene tub. The enclosure should be large enough (minimum 20 gallon tank) so that a temperature gradient may be established using a basking light, from 90-95°F (32-35°C) on the hot end to 75-85°F (24-30°C) on the cool end. Captive tortoises not exposed to direct sunlight should receive daily exposure to UVB radiation from special lights to properly absorb calcium from the diet. Cage accessories are provided by offering cork bark, driftwood, plastic shelters and non-poisonous plants.

### Vital Statistics

#### Body length:

male 24-30 in (60-76 cm)  
female 20-24 in (50-60 cm)

#### Body weight:

male 70-120 lb (30-55 kg)  
female 65-75 lb (29-34 kg)

**Age of sexual maturity:**  
5-8 years

**Average free-ranging life span:**  
80+ years