Leopard Gecko

Eublepharis macularius | Expanded owner guide | Habitat, nutrition, health, lifespan and costs

Leopard geckos need a secure floor-level habitat, a measured warm-to-cool gradient, several hides, a humid hide, varied live insects and access to a reptile-experienced veterinarian.

At a glance

Leopard geckos are ground-dwelling, mostly evening-active lizards. Their eyelids and lack of sticky toe pads distinguish them from many other pet geckos. Individual temperament varies; calm handling is learned gradually and is never guaranteed.

Lifespan and size

Plan for a long commitment. Published estimates vary: some veterinary care sources give 10–15 years, while Merck lists 20+ years in captivity. Plan for a 20-year commitment, with some individuals living longer. Genetics, health and husbandry matter. Adults are often around 7–10 inches (18–25 cm), with variation among individuals.

Who is a good fit?

A prepared beginner can keep one, but it is not a zero-maintenance pet. Live feeder insects, temperature controls, daily checks, a long-term budget and specialist veterinary care are part of routine ownership.

Set up and test the habitat before bringing the gecko home. Keep one gecko per enclosure; housing together can lead to stress, injury or breeding.



Illustrative species photograph

Care through every life stage

Age, growth, body condition and health affect feeding and handling. Keep a simple log so gradual changes are easier to notice.

Hatchling and juvenile

- Provide appropriately sized live insects and frequent access to clean water. Young geckos need close observation of eating, stool, shedding and growth.

- Use a secure enclosure with all essential hides and a properly controlled heat source from the beginning; avoid improvised small containers that make a gradient impossible.

- Weigh on a consistent schedule using a gram scale, if this can be done without prolonged stress.

Adult

- Maintain a varied live-insect diet matched to body condition and activity. Feeding frequency usually decreases as growth slows; use a reptile veterinarian’s plan rather than a fixed rule copied from a seller.

- Keep warm, cool and humid hides available year-round. A gecko may eat less temporarily during shedding or environmental changes, but persistent change needs review.

Older gecko or one with a chronic condition

- Ask the veterinarian whether prey size, feeding frequency, supplement plan, enclosure access or monitoring should change.

- Make water and hides easy to reach. Do not assume weight loss, reduced appetite or weakness is normal aging.

Useful care log

Record	Why it helps
Date, weight, body shape	Shows trends that may be missed day to day.
Insects offered and eaten	Helps discuss appetite, variety and feeding changes.
Warm/cool readings, equipment	Makes it easier to find changes after bulb or thermostat replacement.
Shedding, stool, behavior	Provides useful history for veterinary triage.

Build a secure adult habitat

Leopard geckos need usable floor area and cover. Plan enough room for warm, cool and humid hides without crowding the walking area.

Core setup

Item	Planning note
Enclosure	A common current adult target is about 36 x 18 x 18 inches (roughly 40–50 gallons). Choose secure ventilation and floor space; larger can work when a proper gradient is maintained.
Warm hide	Place over the warm zone; entrance should be easy to use and the inside large enough to turn around.
Cool hide	Provide a shaded retreat on the cooler side.
Humid hide	Keep a separate humid microclimate to support normal shedding.
Water and food	Use stable, shallow dishes that are easy to clean and cannot tip.
Cover and climbing	Add low, stable clutter and safe surfaces; avoid high falls and loose gaps.

Before the gecko arrives

- Run all equipment for several days. Check readings at the warm hide, cool zone and relevant surfaces.
- Secure doors, cords, lamp guards and escape gaps. Keep the enclosure away from drafts, direct sun and other pets.
- Photograph the final setup and write down equipment models, bulb age and readings for the veterinarian.

The right temperature and UVB exposure depend on equipment, distance and enclosure construction. Measure the actual habitat and ask a reptile veterinarian to review it.

Heat, humidity and lighting

Leopard geckos regulate their body temperature by moving between areas. Avoid one uniform temperature and never allow uncontrolled heat.

Build a measured gradient

- Provide a warm retreat and cooler area. Published care references give different target readings and measurement locations; use a reputable species-specific plan, measure with digital instruments and have a reptile veterinarian confirm your setup.

- Use a thermostat matched to the heating device. Place its probe securely where it can read the controlled zone, then independently verify temperatures with digital thermometers and an infrared thermometer.

- Recheck after moving the probe, replacing a bulb, changing substrate, or seasonal room changes.

Humidity and humid hide

- The overall enclosure is generally kept relatively dry with good ventilation, but the humid hide should stay suitably moist. This small humid retreat is important for shedding and does not mean the whole enclosure should be wet.

- Check the humid hide daily; replace damp material if dirty or moldy. Do not close vents to trap humidity.

UVB and day-night routine

- Low-level, species-appropriate UVB can support health. Select a fixture and safe distance for this animal, follow manufacturer instructions and avoid glass or plastic barriers that block UVB.

- Keep a regular daytime light cycle and a dark, quiet night. Do not leave bright lights on overnight.

Heat safety

- Do not use unregulated heat rocks or allow direct contact with hot bulbs. A gecko may not move away quickly enough from a burn hazard.

- If readings are abnormal, check instrument placement, thermostat, bulb and room conditions. If you cannot restore safe conditions, contact a reptile clinic.

Hides, substrate and cleaning

A simple, clean layout makes health checks easier while giving the gecko choices and secure cover.

Three useful retreats

- Warm hide: dry, dark and close to the controlled warm area.
- Cool hide: shaded, on the cooler side.
- Humid hide: a contained, moist hide with clean substrate that is replaced if soiled or moldy.
- Each hide should be stable, smooth-edged and large enough for the gecko to enter and turn around.

Flooring and furnishings

- For a new, juvenile, ill or monitored animal, paper towels or another veterinarian-approved easy-clean surface can simplify observation.
- Avoid ingestible loose substrate when it creates a risk for this gecko; avoid sand, crushed walnut and corncob. Ask a reptile veterinarian before using a naturalistic loose substrate.
- Secure rocks and hides so they cannot shift or trap toes. Avoid sharp edges and tall unstable structures.

Cleaning rhythm

When	Routine
Daily	Refresh water, remove stool and uneaten insects, check hide and equipment.
As needed	Wash food and water dishes; replace soiled humid-hide material and flooring.
Regular deep clean	Use a reptile-safe disinfectant according to its label; rinse and dry fully before the animal returns.

Keep reptile tools, feeder insects and tank-cleaning supplies out of food areas. Wash hands with soap and water after contact with the gecko, insects, stool or enclosure.

Nutrition: a varied insect diet

Leopard geckos are insectivores. They need appropriately sized live prey with good nutrition; a single feeder type is not a complete long-term plan.

Rotate suitable feeder insects

- Common options may include crickets, dubia roaches, black soldier fly larvae and appropriately sized mealworms or other species recommended by a reptile veterinarian.

- Use captive-raised insects from a reliable supplier. Do not collect insects outdoors, where pesticides and parasites may be present.

- Offer prey small enough to be swallowed safely. Remove uneaten insects after feeding so they cannot bite or stress the gecko.

- Do not rely on fruit, vegetables or ordinary pet food as a replacement for live insect prey.

Gut-loading and prey care

- Feed insects a suitable gut-loading diet before offering them. Provide clean insect housing and appropriate food and water sources.

- Do not feed spoiled, moldy or dead insects. Keep feeder containers away from kitchens and children.

Amount and frequency

Young geckos generally need more frequent meals than adults. For adults, feeding frequency and portion size should reflect body condition, activity and veterinary guidance. Record what is offered and eaten, then adjust with a reptile veterinarian if weight trends up or down.

Refusing food can reflect temperature, stress, shedding, reproductive status or illness. Check the habitat and seek veterinary advice when appetite loss persists or comes with weight loss or weakness.

Calcium, vitamins and feeding routine

Supplement needs depend on age, diet, UVB exposure, health and the exact product. More is not automatically safer.

Supplements

- Ask a reptile veterinarian for a written plan that names the calcium and multivitamin products, whether D3 is needed, and how often to use each.

- Do not combine several products or add concentrated vitamins without veterinary guidance. Excess or deficiency can both cause harm.

- Gut-load prey and dust as directed. Keep product labels and note expiration dates.

Simple feeding routine

Before feeding	During	After
Check prey size, condition and approved supplement schedule.	Offer a measured number of moving insects; supervise and observe the gecko.	Remove leftovers, clean dish, note appetite and update log.

Body condition and weight

- Use a gram scale when practical. Track the trend rather than reacting to a single reading.

- A noticeably thin tail, sudden weight loss, a persistently enlarged abdomen or rapidly changing body shape deserves veterinary evaluation.

- Do not use force-feeding, syringe-feeding or home remedies unless a reptile veterinarian instructs you.

Hydration

Keep clean water available in a shallow dish and refresh it daily. A moist hide helps shed management but does not replace drinking water or treatment for dehydration.

Water, bathing and shedding

For most healthy leopard geckos, a clean shallow water dish and a correctly maintained humid hide are the daily essentials.

Does a leopard gecko need baths?

Routine scheduled bathing is generally unnecessary for a healthy gecko. Provide fresh water and a humid hide instead. A gecko may sit in its water dish; that alone does not mean it needs to be bathed.

When a soak may be considered

- If a reptile veterinarian recommends a short, closely supervised soak for a specific reason, use shallow, comfortably warm water that cannot cover the nose or prevent the gecko from standing.

- Do not leave the animal unattended. Do not use soap, oils, salts or additives.

- Do not use soaking to treat dehydration, constipation, retained shed or injury without veterinary advice. A weak gecko can aspirate or drown.

Normal shedding

- Eyes may look cloudy and the skin may become dull before shedding. Many geckos eat their shed skin.

- Keep the humid hide clean and suitably moist. Check toes and tail tip for retained skin, especially after a shed.

- Never pull skin off, cut it, or apply lotion. If shed constricts a toe, causes swelling, affects an eye or repeatedly fails to clear, contact a reptile veterinarian.

Bathing is not a required weekly care task. For an individual problem, ask the reptile veterinarian before soaking or trying to remove shed.

Handling, tail safety and enrichment

Build trust through brief, calm, voluntary interactions. The gecko must be able to retreat, and the tail must never be used as a handle.

A gradual introduction

Stage	Try this	Pause if
Settle	Let the gecko acclimate and observe quietly.	It hides constantly or stops eating after repeated disturbance.
Offer a hand	Place a still hand low in the enclosure; allow the gecko to approach.	It bolts, vocalizes, bites or makes a defensive posture.
Support	Scoop gently from below with both hands supporting the body and all feet.	It struggles or tries to jump. Lower it close to a safe surface.
Return	Set it down gently and give quiet time. Keep sessions short.	Never pull, squeeze or grab the tail.

Tail drop and tail regrowth

A threatened gecko may drop its tail. This is a defense response, can be stressful and requires a clean, safe habitat while the wound heals. Seek a reptile veterinarian promptly to check the injury and advise care. The tail usually regrows with a different shape; it is not a reason to handle the animal more.

Enrichment

- Offer stable hides, low textured surfaces and clutter that allows exploration without falls.
- Avoid free-roaming, forced handling, tapping glass or waking the gecko repeatedly during the day.
- Keep one gecko per enclosure. Do not use another gecko as a “companion.”

Daily care and household hygiene

A short routine prevents small problems from being missed and helps protect people from germs carried by reptiles.

Daily check

Check	Look for
Water and dishes	Clean water, stable dishes and no contamination.
Heat and light	Thermostat active, readings in expected range, timer working.
Appetite and movement	Normal alertness at active times, walking and grip.
Skin, toes and eyes	Shed retained around toes, swelling, discharge or injury.
Stool and weight	Changes in stool, appetite or weight trend.

Salmonella and handwashing

- Reptiles can carry Salmonella even when they look healthy. Wash hands with soap and water after touching the gecko, feeder insects, water, stool or enclosure items.

- Keep the gecko and its supplies out of kitchens and food-preparation areas. Do not wash its dishes in a kitchen sink.

- Adults should supervise children. Extra precautions are important around children under five, adults 65 and older, and people with weakened immune systems.

Quarantine new reptiles

If other reptiles live in the home, ask a reptile veterinarian about quarantine duration, separate equipment and testing. Keep new animals in a separate room when possible and avoid sharing tools.

Preventive veterinary care and common problems

Arrange a reptile-experienced veterinary exam soon after acquisition. Ask the clinic to set the follow-up interval for this individual gecko.

How often should a gecko see a vet?

- Start with a baseline examination after bringing the gecko home; bring its weight, feeding history, stool information and habitat readings.

- For a healthy adult, ask whether an annual wellness review is appropriate; the veterinarian may recommend a different interval based on age, history and local parasite risk. Routine vaccines are not generally used for pet reptiles.

- Young, newly acquired, breeding, chronically ill or recovering geckos may need more frequent checks. Call sooner for symptoms rather than waiting for the next routine visit.

Ask about

- Body condition and weight; mouth, eyes, skin, toes and tail; diet and supplement plan; parasite screening/fecal testing; heat, humid hide and UVB.

- Find a clinic that routinely sees reptiles and know where to go after hours.

Problems veterinarians commonly evaluate

Care references describe concerns such as intestinal parasites, metabolic bone disease, digestive problems, retained shed or toe loss, tail injury, mouth inflammation, respiratory illness and eye problems. These symptoms can have different causes; this list is not a home diagnostic guide.

A baseline visit is useful even when the gecko appears healthy. Routine prevention is less stressful when the clinic, transport carrier and records are prepared in advance.

Signs of illness and treatment

Reptiles may hide illness. A persistent change from this gecko’s normal behavior deserves attention, especially when several signs appear together.

Sign	What to do
Labored or open-mouth breathing at rest, discharge, repeated clicking	Contact a reptile veterinarian urgently; call emergency services if breathing is difficult.
Marked weakness, tremors, poor coordination, cannot walk normally	Seek urgent veterinary care. Keep the gecko secure and prevent chilling or overheating during transport.
Rapid weight loss, persistent refusal to eat, sunken appearance	Call the clinic promptly for triage; do not wait weeks or force-feed.
Swollen jaw or limbs, soft jaw, abnormal posture	Arrange veterinary assessment; do not change supplements at random.
Retained shed constricting toes, eye swelling/discharge, wound or tail injury	Contact a reptile veterinarian. Do not pull shed, cut tissue or apply human products.
Diarrhea, blood, severe straining, prolapse	Urgent same-day veterinary advice. Bring a fresh stool sample if instructed.

What treatment can involve

After an examination, the veterinarian may recommend fecal testing, imaging, blood work, prescription medication, wound care or supportive treatment. The right care depends on the diagnosis and the gecko’s size and condition.

Do not self-treat

- Do not give human, dog or cat medication, leftover antibiotics, dewormers, oils or concentrated supplements unless prescribed by the reptile veterinarian.
- Do not force water or food into the mouth, peel stuck skin, or attempt to treat an impaction at home.

Breathing trouble, severe weakness, serious injury, prolapse or inability to move normally needs urgent veterinary help. Call ahead to confirm the clinic treats reptiles.

Approximate costs in the United States

These are planning estimates, not quotes. Prices vary by retailer, state, enclosure type, shipping, tax and how often live insects are purchased.

Expense	Approximate range	Notes
Adult enclosure	$180–$300	Current 36 x 18 x 18-inch examples start near $199; shipping and stand may be extra.
Heat source, fixture and thermostat	$60–$160	Thermostat is essential for controlled heat; one current basic thermostat example is about $46.
UVB fixture and bulb	$40–$100	Low-level UVB kit and replacement schedule depend on model.
Thermometers, timer, hygrometer	$35–$100	Use reliable digital readings and a temperature check tool.
Hides, dishes, flooring, décor	$50–$150	Include warm, cool and humid hides.
Initial setup estimate	About $400–$800	Before the gecko, food, shipping, tax or veterinary reserve.

Ongoing monthly planning

- Live insects and gut-load food: about $20–$60 per month; cost depends on feeder variety, age, shipping and local supply.

- Calcium, vitamins, substrate and cleaning supplies: about $5–$20 per month on average; bulbs are a periodic replacement expense.

- Electricity: roughly $5–$15 per month, depending on local rates and equipment.

- Routine veterinary care: set aside approximately $90–$200 per wellness visit as a planning range; fecal testing, imaging and treatment add cost. One exotic-vet network lists exams from $90 in Arizona to $115 in Colorado/Oregon; these are clinic examples, not a national average.

- Emergency care: maintain a separate reserve. Emergency exam fees, diagnostics and treatment can quickly add several hundred dollars.

Plan roughly $35–$95 per month for insects, supplies and electricity, plus about $10–$20 monthly set aside for routine veterinary visits. A practical ongoing reserve is around $45–$115 per month before emergency care. Ask local clinics for exam and after-hours fees before purchase.

Choosing a gecko and preparing for travel

Choose a healthy, documented animal and understand its history before paying or adopting.

Questions for a seller or rescue

- What is the exact species, hatch date, sex if known, source and captive-bred status?
- What insects and supplements does it currently receive? Can I see feeding, weight, shedding and veterinary records?
- Has it had any tail loss, parasite treatment, eye or shedding problems?
- Can I see its current enclosure, warm/cool readings and humid hide? What is the return or rehoming policy?
- May my reptile veterinarian examine it soon after transfer?

Before purchase

- Confirm state, county and city rules for possession, sale, transport and shipping; keep proof of source and purchase.
- Prepare an adult habitat, locate a reptile veterinarian and budget for an emergency.
- If other reptiles live at home, plan a separate quarantine area and ask your vet about testing.

Safe carrier and transport

- Use a secure, ventilated carrier with clean paper or a non-slip liner. Keep the gecko away from direct sun, drafts and hot cars.
- Never leave the animal unattended in a parked vehicle. Avoid temperature extremes and unnecessary stops.
- For a clinic visit, bring recent weight, feeding and shedding notes, temperature readings and a fresh stool sample if requested.

Responsible ownership

- Never release a pet gecko outdoors. If care becomes impossible, contact a reputable reptile rescue or qualified rehoming organization.
- Do not breed or co-house geckos casually. Breeding has health, genetic and placement responsibilities.

References and further reading

This guide summarizes general owner education. For individual temperature targets, supplements, diagnosis and treatment, confirm current advice with a reptile veterinarian.

Veterinary and care references

Merck Veterinary Manual, Management and Husbandry of Reptiles
Merck Veterinary Manual, Routine Health Care of Reptiles
Merck Veterinary Manual, Average Life Span of Reptiles in Captivity
Royal Veterinary College, Leopard Gecko Care (2024)
Merck Veterinary Manual, Important Husbandry Requirements for Selected Reptiles
Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians, Leopard Gecko Care handout
CDC, Reptiles and Amphibians

Book provided for further reading

Philippe de Vosjoli, Thomas Mazorlig, Roger J. Klingenberg, Ron Tremper and Brian Viets, Leopard Gecko Manual, 2nd ed. (Fox Chapel Publishing)

Chewy lists the second edition as a 184-page paperback with sections on anatomy and behavior, nutrition and feeding, housing, health issues, shedding, tail loss and breeding. Use the book as additional reading, and verify medical and husbandry decisions with current veterinary guidance.

Price examples checked November 2026

ReptileSupply, Leopard Gecko Enclosures
ReptileSupply, Exo Terra Thermostat example
Exotic Pet Vets, Exam Pricing

Educational guide only. It does not replace an examination by a reptile veterinarian or current local legal requirements. Seek prompt veterinary care for breathing difficulty, severe weakness, injury or rapid weight loss.