

There's not just an epidemic of obesity affecting people these days, but it's extending to our pets as well, and as far as reptiles are concerned, it seems to be a particular problem with bearded dragons. Pete Hawkins gives his views on what can be done to address this issue.



# Tackling obesity in bearded dragons

**Q**uite frankly, I'm getting appalled at the number of cases of obesity that are evident in adult bearded dragons these days. It's becoming a huge and increasing problem. I've noticed it more so over the past few years, although this is partly due to the fact that we have social media where people are constantly posting pictures of their pets.

I also see the same old excuses trotted out, although in fairness, some people may not actually realise their lizards are overweight in every case. The reason that I most commonly hear is "my dragon will only eat morios (super mealworms), and waxworms", which is absolute rubbish. This simply isn't true.. We have wide range

of live foods and greens/vegetables/plants available these days, and increasingly so with the convenience of online deliveries. Be honest – if your bearded dragon is obese, the only reason is because of you! It may sound harsh...yes, but it's also true.

Obesity is, of course, usually accompanied by other health problems as well. In particular, fatty liver disease is a very common occurrence in this species nowadays, according to the reptile vets that I spoke to during the preparation of this

▼ **Too much reliance on live food is harmful for bearded dragons.**

article. In simple terms, too much fat in the diet causes the liver tissue itself to become infiltrated by fat. Thus, the organ can no longer function properly and break down toxins, and these can then



Obesity is apparent on the body and around the neck area, as is evident in this individual.



► **Illness in bearded dragons can be linked with obesity in various ways..**

build up in the bloodstream.

When trying to address obesity issues in the first place, I'll always ask the same questions:

- How often do you feed your bearded dragon?
- What do you feed your bearded dragon?
- Has the bearded dragon has a health check-up with a specialist reptile vet?

It's when you hear the answers that you soon come to realise the common problems. These are:

- Overfeeding.
- No dietary variety.
- And no veterinary involvement, although often, the owner has a friend who breeds beardies, who says it looks fine!

Like all reptiles housed in vivarium surroundings, a bearded dragon can only eat what its keeper provides, although to a certain extent, if you are using a bioactive substrate, your lizard will be able to partake in what it loves to do naturally, and forage for food. But again, these items will only be those that you have placed within the enclosure yourself.

### What are the other causes?

Adult bearded dragons not eating vegetable matter such as their greens and herbs is still a common issue., which underpins many cases of obesity. This issue can often be traced right back to the breeder. These lizards need to be given plant matter as part of their diet from the outset. Yes, I know when young beardies are growing, the focus is all about protein. But it is vital that they accept greens as a significant part of their diet as well, rather than just as a secondary food source.

My advice is always to offer plant matter as the first meal of the day, and to provide as much variety as possible. This honestly does prevent feeding issues once bearded dragons get older, when it appears their feeding preferences are more established.

I guess some breeders may feel they

need to defend themselves here. But why should you? This is not aimed at anyone in particular. And if what you do is the above, then that's great in my view. If it's not though, please adopt this method, when advising new owners. It honestly saves worrying about trying to get a stubborn bearded dragon to eat greens later in life. Plus it also helps to keep a bearded dragon healthier as well, with variety being the spice of life, as the old saying goes.

### The impact of illness

In my experience, I have also found treatment for parasites can knock these lizards off their food, both in terms of live food and greens, and yet afterwards, it can often be much harder to get them to eat greens again. Unfortunately, people often fall into a common trap as a result. They feed the likes of waxworms and morios to their pets, as these are almost guaranteed to be eaten by bearded dragons. This gives the keeper a false sense of encouragement, in that at least

the lizard is eating.

While this is true, it can be the start of a bearded dragon refusing other food items, in favour of these fattier food items, which should only be given as treats occasionally, rather than as staple foods. Think about it – it's rather like giving a child a choice between a salad or a burger. They'll chose what tastes good, irrespective of its nutritional value.

### Feeding too much

This is a big problem that often goes unrecognised until it is too late.

Having kept dragons now over the past 28 years, I've pretty much settled on a method of



A bearded dragon that is active and taking a varied diet, including a significant proportion of greenstuff, is unlikely to be obese.

feeding, which is as follows:

- 0-6 months old – feed 2-3 x daily.
- 6-12 months old – 1 x daily.
- 12 months onwards – 3 or 4 x a week.

Obviously I provide a varied range of greens/vegetables/herbs and fruit on a daily basis throughout the lizard's life.

Also, it is often recommended to provide as much as these lizards want to eat in 15 minutes. But I think that is far too long. Honestly, as much as will be eaten in five minutes is sufficient, and healthier. Coming from arid areas where food is generally in quite short supply, bearded dragons generally tend to be inclined to overindulge anyway. Shortening the feeding period is therefore healthier.

Imagine feeding a baby dragon for 15 minutes, three times every day. That obviously equates to 45 minutes of simply eating on a daily basis, for six months at the start of life. It's far, far too much. Not only will you be going through thousands of bugs per week, but your bearded dragon does not need all that protein in its diet.

Obesity problems can continue later in life when keepers are feeding their adult dragons, being more inclined to worsen at this stage. It's the same vicious cycle that is well-known to afflict dogs and cats these days, but has yet to be recognised to the same degree in these lizards. The situation is not helped by the fact that as they get older, bearded dragons become more sedentary anyway, taking less exercise. So too much and often unsuitable food is increasingly likely to result in unwanted weight gain, resulting in less activity, exacerbating the bearded dragon's weight problem, leading both to health issues and, most likely, a shortened lifespan as a result.

Although I hate to use the word 'staple' when it comes to food for these lizards, which require plenty of variety in their

► **Feeding preferences are established early in a bearded dragon's life.**



diet, offering the wrong choice on a regular basis, particularly with regard to live food, is a significant issue over a period of time. Consider that morios (superworms) used for older beardies have a typical fat content of around 18%, compared with 6% in the case of cricket and 5% in a dubia roach, and you can appreciate how the problem may escalate rapidly if morios are used regularly.

It is unfortunate, as morios can be gut-loaded very easily, ensuring that in other respects, they are a good source of

▼ **The diet offered to bearded dragons needs to change as they grow older.**



vitamins and minerals, but their high fat level definitely counts against them. They therefore need to be regarded as a treat, and never as a staple food item. Yet unfortunately, people persist in using morios daily, by the handful, which is a sure-fire way over time to generate health problems in bearded dragons.

### **Another possible scenario**

Rescue bearded dragons or others acquired as adults can prove to have very





▲ Some bearded dragons have become accustomed not to eat greens, and this reluctance needs to be overcome. Note that it is also not a good idea to keep them with spiky cacti!

exercise. This will also keep the lizard alert, and allow it to explore more, which is an additional benefit. As far as live food is concerned, by all means feed a few waxworms or morios, to add a bit of variety to the bearded dragon's diet. They can be useful for taming and building a bond with your pet.

Most importantly though, do not give live food to an adult daily. By the time that a young bearded dragon is six months old, it should only be receiving live food once a day. From 12-15 months of age, provide live food just every other day or so. Greens should be the food of choice, sprinkled on a rotating basis with calcium and then a more comprehensive supplement including vitamins and other minerals as recommended by the manufacturer.

By taking these simple steps, not only can you adjust the diet of a bearded dragon that has known nothing but live food to a more healthy alternative, but you can also ensure that your pet is likely to be fitter and should live longer as a result. Plus don't forget – the sooner that you start to adjust the food that you are offering as necessary, the better it will be for your bearded dragon. ❖

▼ Encourage your pet to be active, especially as it grows older, to reduce the threat of obesity.



Live food for older bearded dragons should serve more as a treat, rather than being a staple part of their diet.



not necessarily be immediately apparent, such as dental issues. If parasites are present, then treatment is needed. Do this, and then once all is clear, you can start the task of breaking that habit.

For a 'healthy' dragon in good condition that is over a year old, withholding live food can be beneficial. I have used the following method successfully, with variations on this basis:

- If you normally offer greens, for example, at 9am, and then give live food at 1-2pm, change the routine.
- Don't provide greens at 9am. Skip that feed entirely.
- Instead, offer the greens at the time that you'd normally be providing live food, at lunchtime in this scenario.
- And don't give any live food during this process at all.

It may well take a couple of weeks to readjust the bearded dragon's feeding habits, but it results in permanent benefits. Once the beardie starts to eat the greens, then what you need to do is to reduce the period if possible, enabling you to move the feeding times back gradually to the original planned time frame, which is 9am in this example. You can reintroduce a suitable quantity of live food, but offer greens in the morning several hours beforehand.

### Key things to remember

Vary the diet of bearded dragons, even in terms of greenstuff, and reduce their live food intake as they grow older. Encourage your pet to be active, by letting it out of its quarters for a run around, to get some

set feeding habits, and in the unfortunate habit of not eating greens. Note the emphasis on the word 'habit'. With bearded dragon being reptiles of routine, if their diet has not previously involved greenstuff, relying exclusively on live food up to this point, then it is a habit that you, as the new keeper, must break.

In this situation, I would recommend starting with a veterinary check-up and a faecal parasite test. This will reveal any underlying existing health issues that may