

Get The Facts About Gopher Tortoises: Upper Respiratory Tract Disease



Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD) is a contagious disease affecting gopher tortoises, as well as other tortoise and turtle species. The infection is caused by the bacteria *Mycoplasma agassizii* and *Mycoplasma testudineum*, which damage tissue in the upper respiratory tract and lungs of tortoises.

How are gopher tortoises affected by Upper Respiratory Tract Disease?

Mycoplasma infection can alter tortoise behavior related to feeding, burrowing and basking. Infected tortoises may refrain from eating, act lethargic or bask during odd hours. As a result, tortoises with the disease can be malnourished, dehydrated and vulnerable to other illnesses or mortality.

A gopher tortoise infected with URTD may display the following signs:

- Runny nose
- Watery eyes
- Swollen or sealed eyelids
- Slight reddening in the inner corner of the eye
- Wheezing or raspy breathing

Although many exhibit these signs when infected, tortoises with URTD may also be asymptomatic, showing no signs of the disease.



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How can I help prevent spreading this gopher tortoise disease?

URTD is spread through direct contact between tortoises.

People may also unintentionally add to the spread of URTD by moving tortoises.

A common example is when a person finds a gopher tortoise alongside a roadway

or in their yard and moves the tortoise to a different area such as a nearby park or forest. The relocated gopher tortoise may be infected with *Mycoplasma*, potentially spreading URTD to an otherwise healthy population in the new area. Relocations of gopher tortoises require an FWC permit, including a health examination of each tortoise before relocation. Captive tortoises, in particular, should not be released back into the wild. The relocation of tortoises with clinical signs of URTD is prohibited.



What should I do if I find a tortoise that appears ill?

There is no cure for URTD, however, the symptoms can be treated by a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. If you encounter a gopher tortoise, the best thing to do is let it be. If a tortoise appears ill or injured, contact a licensed wildlife rehabber for assistance. Relocating gopher tortoises without a permit is illegal and potentially detrimental to healthy populations. For more information on gopher tortoises, conservation efforts, or finding a licensed wildlife rehabber near you, contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Gopher Tortoise Program at **(850) 921-1030** or visit **MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise**.



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