Upper Respiratory Tract Disease in Chelonians 

by Dr Luke Sultana DVM

Upper respiratory tract disease (URTD), also known as ‘Runny Nose Syndrome’, is frequently encountered in pet tortoises. It is characterised by nasal discharge from one or both nostrils, often seen in the form of bubbles (see Figure 1). This nasal discharge is often also accompanied by a soft wheezing sound, ocular discharge and swelling of the eye lids.

A number of bacteria and viruses (mycoplamsma sp, pasteurella sp, herpesvirus, iridovirus) are thought to cause URTD symptoms, and may be present individually or simultaneously in clinically ill animals. However a number of studies show that mycoplasma agassizii is the likely causal agent of this disease.

During early stages of the disease, a typical transparent discharge from one or both nostrils is seen and the tortoise tends to become lethargic. As the situation progresses, appetite is lost and an increase in burrowing activity is usually seen. If left untreated, rapid weight loss, dehydration and death soon follow. URTD can easily go undetected during hibernation, and it is a common cause of death during this period.

If this condition is diagnosed at an early stage, proper veterinary care can yield satisfying results, with most cases improving after a month or so of treatment. Unfortunately, even though the majority of clinically ill

Figure 1: *T.gracea* affected by URTD and presenting typical nasal discharge in the form of bubbles. The individual in (A) shows discoloration around and beneath the nostrils indicating that it is chronically affected by this disease.
individuals recover, they may not rid themselves completely of this disease. Instead, the causal agent persists asymptomatically in the nasal cavity and may give rise to the clinical illness again in the future. Chronically ill individuals with reoccurring nasal discharge often present discoloration and erosion around the nostrils (see Figure 1A).

This disease is spread relatively easily from one individual to another by direct contact with the nasal and ocular discharge and can therefore have disastrous results in large colonies of tortoises. Due to this fact and the possible asymptomatic nature of the disease, a quarantine period of at least six months if recommended for any new tortoise that is being added to an established colony.

If any symptoms of URTD are noticed, please isolate the affected tortoise from the rest of the colony, keep it warm and contact your veterinarian for assistance.

References

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