

Frog Disease Outbreak

What you can do

The winter of 2021 has seen a severe outbreak of Chytrid disease amongst the non-hibernating frogs along the eastern coast of Australia. Frog Chytrid Disease is caused by a single-celled fungus that penetrates the skin of frogs and eventually destroys underlying tissues and disrupts the frog's immune system (leading to secondary bacterial infections). It is mainly the tree frog species that are affected by this disease at this time.

What you might see

In winter, most non-hibernating frogs remain fairly inactive and try to stay out of sight. The cold temperatures and lack of insect food mean that active foraging is a waste of time and so these frogs seek a secluded place where they will not be disturbed and wait until the warmer weather returns.

If you find a frog on your lawn during winter, it is usually a sign that the frog is sick. The chytrid fungus is active in cold weather and attacks the sheltering frogs. Once the frog realises that something is wrong, they leave their shelter place and begin to move about.

The frog may seem very lethargic and may appear slimy (the frogs will often try to slough their infected skin). They are often a dark colour as well.

What you can do

At present, wildlife carers are inundated with sick frogs. We have been urging the general public to try treating sick frogs at home.

Step 1: Notify a wildlife care group that you have a sick frog. In Sydney, the Frog Help Line is your best contact 0419-249-728.

Step 2: The contact person will advise you if the frog is beyond help or not. If the frog is not beyond help, they will ask whether you would be prepared to look after this frog. The treatment is simple but requires at least 1 month of caring for the frog.

Step 3: If you agree to have a go at treating the frog, this is what you will need:-

- * an escape-proof container (pet shops sell plastic tanks with clip-on lids that will do for this purpose).
- * a small water bowl to put in the container
- * some plastic plants or plastic objects for the frog to hide under
- * a source of heating the container (pet shops sell cage heaters or thermostats that can be placed in deeper water bowls).
- * a source of food for the frog (pet shops also sell tubs of live crickets).

How to treat the frog

The fungus is killed by a combination of elevated heat and salt water exposure.

The frog container needs to be kept between 20° and 24°C for a period of at least four weeks.

The frog will also need to be given weak salt water baths, especially during the first week in captivity.

The frog is unlikely to want to feed for the first few days but as the heat and salt treatment kicks in the frog will eventually feel like eating again.

A shallow water container containing a weak salt solution is to be kept in the container at all times. The salt concentration is approximately 3% strength sea water (ie 0.35 grams of table salt per litre of water). During the first week, the frog should be placed in the water bath and the salty water splashed all over the frog. The salt water baths should occur at least twice a day for the first week. After the first week, active bathing can stop (particularly if the frog has started feeding), but a container with weak salty water should always be available to the frog.

The water in the water containers will need to be replaced every 4 or five days. In the first weeks, the frog may shed its skin frequently and the water baths may become murky quickly. If so, change the water more frequently. Never leave the frogs without access to water.

To feed the frog. Introduce two or three live crickets into the container, step back and observe the frog's reaction. If the frog shows no interest in the crickets, it may still be feeling too sick to eat. Offer crickets to the frog every day. Hopefully, after a few days it will start feeding by itself.

What to do if you have questions

Make sure you have a contact number for your wildlife carer group or the Frog Help Line number. Don't be shy about asking questions or sending images of your frog.

What if the frog dies?

There is always a chance the frog may not recover. If it dies, do not feel bad. You gave the frog its best chance to overcome a particularly nasty disease. Who knows, you may be needed to save another frog later on.

Should I take a sick frog to the vet

Most vets do not have much knowledge of frogs (there are some exceptions and you can ask the wildlife carer group if they know of frog vets in your local area).

Do not move sick frogs around

Remember, these are infected animals. If you find a sick frog at your place, do not take it to someone else's place (as you will spread the disease more widely).

Practise Home Hygiene

As your frog is infectious, you will have to be careful with home hygiene. People cannot catch chytrid disease but we can carry the spores and spread the disease. Always wash your hands whenever you touch the frog or the frog container. Be extra careful when changing the frog's water that you don't splash or scatter infected water about your house.

If you think that you may have splashed some water in the house, you can disinfect the site using most commercial disinfectants (such as Pine-O-Clean, Dettol etc).

Things to Know about Frog Skin

Frog skin is not like your skin, it is very thin and porous. Frog's absorb water and gases through their skin. But they will also absorb any pollutant or contaminant that they come in contact with. This is why you must never introduce nasty chemicals, detergents or other biological agents into the frog container. Always keep your hands clean (or use disposable gloves) when touching the frog container.

Recovery

Once your frog has recovered and has regained body mass. It may be ready for release. Check with your wildlife carer group to make sure it is ready to go. The frog is to be released at the site of capture. If that was your back lawn, let it go on the back lawn – but maybe do it at night, when there are fewer predators about.

Congratulations

You have made a positive step towards conserving Australian wildlife.