Hibernation Booklet

A guide to Hibernation.

By The Tortoise Shop
www.thetortoiseshop.com
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Introduction

“You do not have to hibernate your tortoise within the first 12 months of ownership, regards of age.”

The breeds of tortoise that hibernate do so for health reasons. Irregular hibernation will adversely affect the tortoise’s health and lifespan.

Most Mediterranean breeds are biologically set to hibernate for a period of time; it is unnatural for tortoises to be awake and eating 365 days a year.

You cannot trick Mother Nature without consequences; if your tortoise is awake every winter, the increased food intake can lead to abnormal growth and in turn cause Metabolic Bone Disease, lumpy shells and sometimes even kidney and bladder stones.

The positives of hibernation far outweigh the negatives!

Common mistakes made include:

- Feeding the tortoise prior to hibernation
- Incorrect hibernation temperature i.e. above 10°C or below 0°C
- No protection against predators (when hibernating outside)
- Hibernating an ill tortoise

So that’s the negatives out the way, let’s look at the right way to hibernate your tortoise.
Wind Down Process

*The tortoise must have an empty gut but a full bladder!*

You need to completely starve the tortoise prior to the hibernation period. The starvation period should be:

- **14 - 20 days for tortoises aged between 2-3 years**
- **21 - 28 days for tortoises older than 4 years**

Whilst going through the starvation period the tortoise must have a full bladder. We recommend daily bathing throughout the wind down process; this will ensure that the tortoise is nicely hydrated and help your tortoise empty it’s gut.

When your tortoise has an empty gut and a full bladder you need to be sure that you hibernate the tortoise in the right location – where your tortoise isn’t going to freeze but is also not going to wake up early due to warm weather.

The perfect temperature for hibernating is between 2–5°C constantly.

We strongly suggest the fridge method for hibernation. We find this to be the safest and most effective method available. A domestic fridge temperature is around 5°C and opening the door for a few seconds daily will ensure adequate air supply.

Brick garages can also be used, but you must be on guard as you have less control over the outdoor temperatures.
Boxing Up Your Tortoise

Place your tortoise in a small plastic tub large enough for the tortoise to be able to make a 360 turn (such as a margarine/ice cream tub) containing unsterilised top soil/compost. Place this tub in a cardboard box (such as a shoe box) containing poly chippings – these are an excellent insulation buffer – you can also use shredded paper if the chippings are not available. Ensure that these boxes are not air tight, and that they both have air holes. You can secure the lids with elastic bands.

**Hibernation Time Scales**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>10 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>16 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th year and over</td>
<td>22 weeks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(These timescales can often be too long with our warmer winters, so use your own judgement here)

When you hibernate your tortoise for the first time, we strongly suggest that you only hibernate for 3 weeks regardless of the age of the tortoise.
Waking Up

Immediately after awakening you should let the tortoise acclimatise at room temperature for around half an hour. Whilst the tortoise acclimatises, turn on the basking and UV lamps in the tortoise table.

We recommend that you bathe your tortoise for 10 minutes or so in lukewarm water; this will allow your tortoise to re-hydrate and flush out the toxins in its body. After bathing, place your tortoise back into the tortoise table. In the days following awakening, you should increase the room temperature and bathe daily.

Feeding should commence within a day or two. If your tortoise hasn’t eaten within seven days of waking up after hibernation we suggest you seek advice from a reptile vet.
FAQ’s

Q: Should I worm my tortoise before hibernation?
A: Yes, your tortoise will need to be wormed 1 month prior to the wind down, to avoid complications.

Q: What temperature should my fridge be for hibernation?
A: Your fridge needs to be steady between 2–5 degrees celcius. Ensure you measure your fridge’s temperature for at least a week, min and max temperatures, day and night, before beginning your wind down.

Q: Do I need to turn my lamp(s) off during the wind down?
A: You should turn your lamp off an hour earlier each day, once the wind down is started. By the 11th day, you should no longer turn your lamp(s) on.

Q: My tortoise is still pooing and is supposed to go in the fridge tomorrow, what should I do?
A: Ensure your lamp(s) is switched off and the room is cool. Tortoises will only eat if they are warm and should not be warm at this point of the wind down. Lower the room temperature, remove the bedding (your tortoise is definitely eating it) and give another 7 days with 2 baths a day. Do not hibernate until your tortoise is 7 days poo free.

Q: My tortoise has done a wee during the wind down, is it still ok to hibernate it?
A: Yes, weeing is a sign that your tortoise is well hydrated. We’d be concerned if it wasn’t weeing (bear in mind, you don’t always see your tortoise weeing if they do it in the bath).

Q: My tortoise is in the fridge, hibernating, but has done a wee on the soil. Does this mean something is wrong?
A: No, we cannot expect that full bladder to stay full. Natural reflexes in your tortoise’s body will release wee occasionally, your tortoise will stay hydrated regardless.
FAQ’s

Q: My tortoise has been in the fridge for a week and is still digging. Is it still awake?
A: In the wild tortoises bury themselves and continuously dig to regulate their body temperature. This natural instinct is not lost in captivity, as long as your temperatures are correct, your tortoise will be asleep. If you are concerned that your tortoise is awake, you should check your thermometer to ensure the temperature does not fluctuate above 5 degrees celcius.

Q: My tortoise has been in the fridge for 24 hours and it’s eyes are still open. What should I do?
A: Give your tortoise another day or 2 and ensure the temperature is below 5 degrees celcius. Some tortoises need it cooler than others.

Q: What do I do if my fridge gets too warm (above 7 degrees) or too cold (below 2 degrees)?
A: Abandon hibernation and follow the waking up instructions above. Do not try to put your tortoise back into hibernation after waking up.
About The Tortoise Shop

Only tortoise perfection will suffice

The Tortoise Shop has meticulously cared for, and maintained, several colonies of differing species of tortoise within the U.K. careful expansion and prudent investment over the years has enabled The Tortoise Shop to grow into the UK’s market leader in tortoise breeding, retailing, product design and in-house manufacturing. The Tortoise shop prides itself in operating a very personal and friendly service – putting customers and their tortoises first!

Our Online Shop – www.thetortoiseshop.com

Selling a wide range of tortoise accessories including: housing, lighting, food, bedding as well as tortoises!
Contact Us

Here to help, Contact us on:

Phone: 01482 222214
Email: info@thetortoiseshop.com
Website: www.thetortoiseshop.com

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