

# Bear Veterinary Care

Regular veterinary exams are crucial for bear health.

Knowing what to watch for as you care for your bears is also important. Paying attention to your bear's coat, eyes, teeth, movement and activity level, behavior, and stool can provide insights into your bear's health status.



## COMMON HEALTH ISSUES IN BEARS

### Skin Disease

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** patchy hair loss; itchiness; reddened, crusty, or thickened skin

- Many different causes: parasites (e.g., mange), seasonal allergies, hormone imbalance, infection (bacterial, viral, or fungal).
- Hair loss (or alopecia) could also be caused by trauma from rubbing or self-injury due to stress.

**WHEN TO CALL THE VET:**

Any time there are bloody or crusty sores, hair loss, or itching that interferes with the bear's ability to be comfortable.



### Broken Teeth

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** reluctance to eat or chew, bad breath, behavior change, dark or broken teeth

- Often occur from bears chewing rocks, enclosure fencing, or enclosure bars.
- Clinical signs may be subtle
- Monitoring regularly for oral disease helps catch problems early.
- A broken tooth is painful, and your vet will know how to manage the issue.

**WHEN TO CALL THE VET:**

**RIGHT AWAY!** Prompt treatment can prevent more severe problems like a tooth root abscess, infection of the surrounding bone, or even a bacterial infection that enters the blood stream and affects the heart or kidneys.



### Arthritis

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** slow or stiff movements, less active, sleeps more, climbs less, more irritable

- Especially common in bears that are geriatric, obese, injured, or have poor muscle tone.
- Housing on hard surfaces may cause or worsen arthritis.
- Extra bedding, softer substrate, and lowered resting platforms provide more comfort.
- Anti-inflammatory drugs can help manage pain.

**WHEN TO CALL THE VET:**

If you notice changes in your bear's movement or behavior, your vet can help you design a treatment plan to ensure comfort and improve mobility.

### Intestinal Parasites

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** diarrhea, poor appetite, weight loss, blood in stool

- Bears are susceptible to roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms, and flatworms (flukes).
- Regular fecal exams for parasites will allow for prompt treatment.

**WHEN TO CALL THE VET:**

If diarrhea persists for more than 2 or 3 days, there is blood in the stool, or there is noticeable weight loss.

**PRACTICAL TIP**



You can train bears to allow close examination of areas on their bodies like skin, feet, and eyes and to open their mouths so you can check their teeth regularly.



This training allows stress-free veterinary exams. You may be able to avoid using anesthesia or sedation if bears are trained to allow routine veterinary procedures, such as an ultrasound or drawing blood.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Understanding what is normal for bears is one of the best things you can do for their health and care. This knowledge will help you spot medical or behavioral problems earlier so you can best treat and manage problems before they worsen.

This Animal Care Aid is part of a series developed to provide information about bear health and care. Refer to the other topics covered in the series for more information on bear care.

Questions? Email us at [CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov](mailto:CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov)

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ANIMAL CARE AID

