What to feed a baby turtle

FOUND A WILD BABY TURTLE?

1. Healthy hatchling in a yard or near water? Leave it.
2. On a road? If it is safe, carry it across in the direction it was heading.
3. Baby sea turtle stranded or hurt? Don't take it.
4. Don't feed or keep a wild turtle.
5. Injured? Put it in a lidded box with air holes somewhere warm and quiet.

Find a wildlife rehabilitator near you: ahnow.org

Report a stranded sea turtle (NOAA hotlines): fisheries.noaa.gov

Found a sick or injured turtle (Tufts Wildlife Clinic): vet.tufts.edu

✓ Safe staples

- **Turtle pellets** – Daily base, head-sized portion
- **Romaine and dark leafy greens** – Daily greens, bulk of the adult diet
- **Dandelion greens** – Leaves and flowers, unsprayed
- **Duckweed and anacharis** – Safe tank plants to graze
- **Red bell pepper** – Shredded, rich in vitamin A
- **Earthworms and nightcrawlers** – Top protein; cut up, shop-bought
- **Crickets and roaches** – Gut-loaded, small enough to swallow
- **Clean water** – Aquatic: eat in water. Box: soaking dish

! Small amounts only

- **Carrots and squash** – Shredded side dish, vitamin A
- **Cucumber** – Safe but watery, low value
- **Spinach and kale** – Mixed in, not daily: oxalates, goitrogens
- **Water lettuce** – Oxalates, invasive; prefer duckweed
- **Bloodworms** – Tempts hatchlings; part of a mix
- **Mealworms and waxworms** – Rotated treat, not a staple
- **Guppies and livebearers** – Now and then; feeders can carry parasites
- **Dried shrimp and gammarus** – Treat only; low in vitamin A
- **Banana** – Treat; all fruit under 5% of the diet
- **Strawberries, blueberries, grapes** – Cut small, occasional treat
- **Apple** – Chopped or skinned, a few pieces
- **Watermelon and cantaloupe** – One small cube as a treat

⊗ Never feed

- **Raw meat and hamburger** – Vets advise against store meat
- **Hot dogs and deli meat** – Processed food, never for turtles
- **Bread and crackers** – Processed food, no nutrition for turtles
- **Milk and cheese** – Can't digest dairy
- **Dog and cat food** – High in fat and vitamin D3
- **Wild bugs, worms and fish** – Parasites and pesticides
- **Fireflies** – Toxic to reptiles
- **Goldfish and rosy reds** – Thiaminase, high fat
- **Avocado, onion and rhubarb** – On vet and keeper avoid lists
- **Tomatoes and citrus** – On keeper avoid lists; skip them
- **Iceberg lettuce and celery** – Empty; leads to vitamin A deficiency
- **Chocolate, chips and peanuts** – Processed human food

Feeding schedule

Age	Looks like	Food	Amount	How often
0–6 months	Hatchling; may still have a yolk sac or scar on its belly in the first days	Aquatic: small pellets, bloodworms, chopped earthworms, floating greens. Box: chopped earthworms and insects plus greens	What it eats in about 5–10 minutes; pellets about the size of its head; remove leftovers	Daily
6–12 months	Juvenile; growing fast and eating eagerly	Same mix: protein about half, greens daily, pellets daily or every other day	Protein and pellets eaten in 5–10 minutes; greens can stay in the water to graze	Daily
1–3 years	Subadult; aquatic turtles start eating more plants	Aquatic: greens daily, pellets 2–3 times a week, protein 1–2 times a week. Box: still mostly worms and insects, more greens	Protein eaten in 5–10 minutes; pellets about head-sized; greens freely	Aquatic: main meal every 2–3 days, greens daily. Box: daily
3 years and up	Adult; sliders and cooters are mostly plant eaters	Aquatic: greens and water plants 50% or more, about 25% pellets, about 25% protein. Box: about half plants, half animal food	Pellets about the size of the head plus greens to graze	Aquatic: every 2–3 days (greens can stay daily). Box: daily or every other day