

Reid Park Zoo

USDA Elephant Health Survey

1. What are the causes of arthritis in elephants?

As they age, like us, older animals may develop arthritis. This applies to every species we're aware of, but the size and weight of elephants compounds this problem in these species. We address this in several ways:

- Keeping the elephants in reasonable weight through diet and exercise
- Encouraging exercise to maintain strength and flexibility
- Using a diet supplement (j-flex) to promote joint health
- Providing a variety of substrates

2. What, if any, foot care practices have been used on captive elephants to maintain healthy feet?

Regular foot care and early treatment of injuries, cracks, or abscesses helps to avoid problems. Daily foot care includes trimming nails, cleaning feet thoroughly, inspecting for the beginnings of any cracks, softness, or other abnormalities and treating accordingly, etc. If there is a concern, treatment may include soaking, antibiotics, or other treatments administered by a veterinarian. With proper daily foot care more extensive care has rarely been necessary at our facility.

3. What substrates are best for captive elephants? Are there any substrate conditions that promote foot problems?

This is unanswered; however we believe that a variety of surfaces, including soft substrates (sand, grass, soil) help maintain good foot health. We believe elephant feet are built to deal with hard surfaces too, and they may even help to keep the footpads and nails worn properly. Therefore a variety of surfaces may be ideal. The surfaces where elephants spend most of their time should be dry and clean of feces and urine.

4. Do captive elephants require a certain amount of exercise (i.e., walking) to maintain healthy feet?

Exercise does help keep elephants more healthy, both stronger and less prone to obesity (again, as with all species). But the claims of the distances required to maintain elephants in good health have become ridiculous and contrary to the best research available. There are some good studies on this, and wild elephants walk about 8 miles a day in an average habitat. Desert elephants may walk farther for food and water, and elephants in rich environments may move very little. We feel that the exercise that our elephants receive in their exhibit keeps them in good health, and this is supported by their medical history.

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5. What industry/professional standards are available for elephant care and husbandry?

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums has a great deal of information linked to their website, and the Elephant Management Association and the AZA Principles of Elephant Management course provide support and knowledge to those caring for elephants.

6. Are there any other health or care issues related to elephants that should be specifically addressed in the AWA standards?

There is now an improved test for Tb, and we believe elephants should be tested regularly. As with primates, enrichment for elephants should be a USDA requirement.



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