

Brandon has been taking care of Herbie for seven years. Herbie was a lost soul that Brandon had found walking in the street when he was eleven years old and has been part of Brandon's life ever since. He lives outdoors in the spring, summer and early fall and spends the winters indoors in a heated terrarium. I should also tell you that Herbie is a box turtle.

Herbie has had no health issues while in Brandon's care until he recently began to develop some type of swelling or mass on the left side of his head. Initially Brandon reported that he had noticed Herbie not eating with his normal amount of enthusiasm. This was especially the case when it came to snails, Herbie's most favorite food. For all his seven years with Brandon, the sight of a snail would bring Herbie sprinting for the food dish; of course sprinting for a box turtle is a relative term.

This decrease in glee over snails became more and more evident over a few weeks until Brandon finally noticed the swelling. The obvious question posed then by Brandon is: what is causing the swelling on the left side of Herbie's head?

It is likely not possible to definitively determine the cause of Herbie's swelling simply by looking. It indeed may be a swelling filled with liquid such as a cyst or it could be a solid mass lesion. In order to figure out how to help Herbie, it is first important to try to figure out what type of lesion we are dealing with.

The first step in my mind would be a simple test called a fine needle aspirate. This is a technique performed using a needle attached to a syringe which is introduced into the lesion to try to aspirate out some of the material that makes up the swelling or mass. This material can then be put onto a slide and looked at under a microscope. It is important to distinguish this procedure from another that is sometimes termed a needle biopsy. A needle biopsy involves actual tissue removal from a lesion with a somewhat larger needle. This harvested tissue is then sent to a pathologist for processing and microscopic examination. This is a more in depth test and is also generally better at identifying a particular lesion, especially in the case of a mass. In Herbie's case, I am confident that a simple fine needle aspirate will give us the necessary information we need to proceed with appropriate treatment.

Having dealt with many box turtles over the past three decades as a veterinarian, I am going to venture an educated guess that Herbie's lesion is an abscess in his left ear canal. These are fairly common in some species of turtles, box turtles especially, and are usually caused by an infection that starts in the mouth or throat and goes up the Eustachian tube into the middle ear. We have this tube too; it's the one we try to open up when we fly on an airplane to equalize the pressure across the ear drum.

When a bacterial infection sets up shop via this eustachian tube into the middle ear in a turtle, the infection elicits a reaction from the body which causes pus to form. This develops into an abscess causing the swelling that Brandon has reported in Herbie's neck.

Reptile pus is very caseous or thick and somewhat chunky so it cannot be effectively drained with a needle. Instead, Herbie will need an anesthetic procedure to allow surgical lancing and cleaning out of his abscess. Along with appropriate antibiotic

therapy and continued cleaning at home by Brandon, Herbie's condition should be entirely curable and return him to his snail loving self.