



CARING FOR YOUR SNAKE

Snakes can make interesting and enjoyable pets if you learn how to properly care for them. Most illness seen in snakes is caused by improper housing (problems with heat, humidity, or lighting). A large variety of snakes are available for sale; some make better pets than others. One should consider the snake's personality and adult size when deciding which species is right for you. With good care many snake species can live 8-20 years or more.

BEHAVIOR: Many snakes will become tame when handled regularly. Small species tend to be faster moving and more easily startled, but can do less harm if they bite. Commonly kept small snakes include king snakes, corn snakes, milk snakes, pine & gopher snakes, and indigo snakes. These are generally even tempered when tamed and are attractively colored. Most are temperate climate species. The other commonly kept snakes are the boas & pythons. Some of these snakes become fairly large. The boas tend to be more even tempered. The Common Boa (also called the Columbian or Red Tailed Boa) is very popular; adults may reach 10-12 feet and are heavy-bodied. The Rainbow Boa is another well-mannered snake that is smaller and very pretty. Pythons as a group are more unpredictable and hence more dangerous as adults; some species such as Reticulated Pythons grow very large and can be aggressive. Two of the most even-tempered pythons are the Burmese Python, which may grow to 18 feet as an adult, and the popular Ball Python (Royal Python) which is small, usually not more than 6 feet long as an adult. These 2 attractive pythons are among the best choices for pets among this group of snakes. Venomous snakes are always aggressive and are very dangerous; these are not recommended as "pets" for anyone but a very experienced reptile keeper. Even "de-venomized" individuals may occasionally still retain part of the venom gland and should be handled with extreme care.

HANDLING: Always move slowly when handling your snake, and wash hands if you have handled its food recently. Aggressive snakes can be held behind the head to prevent biting, but the body should always be supported at the midpoint; never allow the neck to support the snake's weight. Many snakes tame readily with regular handling.

FEEDING: Most snakes eat live prey; small snakes may eat insects or pinkie mice; larger snakes may eat mature mice, rats or even rabbits. In general the snake's diet is balanced due to eating whole prey, and they require no supplements. Avoid feeding insects or pinkies for long periods; rodents who are more mature are more nutritious due to the digested plant material in their stomach which provides vitamins. Always feed healthy looking rodents who are not obese; do not fast the rodent prior to feeding it to the snake. Many owners feed the snake in a different cage; this way the snake doesn't expect food in its regular cage, and the owner is at less risk of being struck at when they put a hand into the cage. Always wash hands after handling rodents so the snake doesn't mistake your hand for food due to the smell. Feeding pre-killed frozen rodents (thaw them first!) prevents rodent bites and reduces disease such as parasites. Small snakes eat more often, usually every 7-10 days. Larger snakes eat larger meals and take longer to digest them; a snake who eats several mice or a large rat may not need to eat for 2-2 ½ weeks. Very large snakes who eat a rabbit (or multiple rats) may be fed monthly.

HOUSING: Try to duplicate natural conditions. The most important factors are heat, humidity & light. Large terrariums are best. Branches may be provided for the snake to climb on. A small water bowl provides drinking water and cage humidity. Do not allow prolonged soaking and defecating in the water, as this contaminates the water source and may also cause skin infections. Artificial turf is a good cage bedding which can be cleaned and reused. Sand, gravel, corn cob, walnut shells, etc. may be used (especially with burrowing snakes), but are harder to keep clean and may cause bowel blockages if eaten.

Heating: unless you wish to heat an entire room to a high temperature, the cage should have mostly solid sides and top (not screen) to help trap heat & humidity. Glass and Plexiglas are popular cage materials; Plexiglas is lighter, stronger, and can be easily cut and drilled. Wood is cheap but is not recommended for flooring as it is hard to clean; avoid woods which produce splinters. A reptile heat pad placed under the terrarium is a good heating method as long as the floor doesn't become too hot. Heat pads can be stuck onto the back cage wall also, which prevents burns. Hot rocks provide heat but must be covered (with other rocks, turf, etc.) to prevent direct contact which may burn the snake. Heat lamps are useful, but must be at a safe distance to prevent burns (at least 18 inches usually). Heat lamps must *not* be bright if used at night; the best are lightless ceramic-coated lamps; dim purple or red coated night bulbs may also be used. Keep all heat sources at one end of the cage, to allow snakes to move away if their skin gets too hot. Take temperature readings in the shade far away from heat sources (at the 'cool' end) to be accurate. Use good mercury, digital, or dial type thermometers; avoid color strip thermometers or infrared guns which don't measure air temperature accurately. North American snakes can be kept at 70-80⁰ F air temperature, but many tropical snakes require 80-90⁰ F. The terrarium can have a 'temperature gradient' with a warmer and cooler side, but all areas should fall within the snake's ideal temperature range. If the cage temperature is uniform, then aim at the middle of the temperature range as an ideal temperature.

Humidity is often required to help snakes shed. Tropical and semi-tropical snakes usually do best with humidity levels over 70%. A small water bowl in a warm cage usually provides adequate humidity if the moisture is trapped with glass or Plexiglas cage walls and roof. A small amount of ventilation is required (screen works well) but too much air flow allows loss of heat & humidity.

Lighting requirements vary between species. Snakes generally do not require a UV source, although UV light does seem to stimulate appetite and activity, and a snake who doesn't eat may improve with UV exposure in the 280-320 nm spectrum (called UV-B).

This mimics outdoor sunlight. Regardless of whether you use a UV bulb, snakes need a bright light source during the day. A good day length is 12-14 hours of light. If you chose to provide UV light, you can use a fluorescent “full spectrum” light. Arcadia or Reptisun (made by Zoo Med) are good choices; other lights with UV output include Reptile D-light, Reptile Daylight (Energy Savers Unlimited), Reptiglo, and Reptasun (by Flukers). These UV lights have a limited effective lifespan, and should be changed every 6-7 months when in use. Fluorescents won't cause burns, and they need to be close to the pet to be effective, usually closer than the length of the light bulb. (A 24 inch tube should be within 18 inches of the snake to be effective). Avoid plastic or glass barriers between the UV light and the pet.

Mercury Vapor Lamps also produce high UV output, plus high heat, so must be kept at a safe distance (at least 18-24 inches away). Their UV output lasts about a year. These devices typically cost \$45-\$100, and when shut off must have a “cool down” period before they can be turned back on. They are mostly suited for very large enclosures, not the average terrarium, and their high UV level isn't needed; simple bright heat lamps can produce heat and white light more cheaply than vapor bulbs.

COMMON DISEASES:

BURNS & RODENT BITES: Unprotected lights, hot rocks or other heat sources may cause burns; these usually look like red sores or blisters on the belly or back. Rodents may occasionally bite the snake on the head or neck when the snake strikes them. More severe wounds may occur if the snake isn't hungry, as the rodent may eventually attack the snake and gnaw large wounds in the snake's body. Never leave a live rodent with a snake for more than an hour if the snake doesn't eat it. If your snake will eat pre-killed rodents then all bite wounds are prevented. Both burns and bites tend to become infected; without treatment this may become life threatening. Always seek medical care if you see a wound on your snake. Treatment involves using injectable antibiotics, and correcting the husbandry to prevent further damage. Betadine or chlorhexidine solution may be applied topically to help disinfect and heal the wounds.

MOUTH ROT (GINGIVITIS): Bacterial infection of the mouth is common. This is caused by normal oral bacteria, which cause disease in the snake when its immune function is decreased by other stresses (such as low air temperature or dirty cage conditions.) Injury to the mouth may also lead to infection. Symptoms can include drooling, odor, mucus in the mouth, red swollen gums, tooth loss, and appetite loss. Severe cases may die. Treatment: Mild cases may heal with supportive care, warming the snake, and topical Betadine or chlorhexidine solution swabbed on the gums 2-3 times daily for 10-14 days. More severe cases need surgical removal of dead oral tissue, and injectable antibiotics daily for 10-14 days.

RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS: Bacteria (and occasionally parasites) can cause respiratory disease. Most cases are due to other stresses such as cool air temperatures. Symptoms include difficulty breathing (sometimes with elevated head & open mouth), wheezing, oral mucus, lethargy, and nasal bubbles. This disease requires prompt veterinary care with antibiotics, warming the snake, and correction of any environmental problems.

INTESTINAL PARASITES: Snakes carry a variety of parasites which come from their food sources or from exposure to other reptiles. Many show no obvious symptoms; a few are underweight or fail to grow normally, or have diarrhea. Occasionally a worm is seen in the feces. Routine fecal analysis will detect and identify any parasite present and allow selection of an appropriate deworming medicine for that parasite.

MITES & TICKS: External parasites are fairly common, especially in wild caught snakes. Mites are small, about the size of a pinhead when mature, and are orange to black in color. They may move freely on the skin. Small mites hide under the scales and may be missed. Mites easily become numerous on stressed or ill snakes, and can suck blood, weaken the snake, and transmit disease between snakes. Treatment is via thorough cage cleaning every 3-7 days, and using topical or systemic mite killing products. Ivermectin injections weekly for 6-8 weeks is helpful; topical bird mite spray applied every 3-7 days for 6-8 weeks also works. Warm water soaks eliminate some mites. Anti mite discs hung near the cage (not inside) may kill some mites. Ticks are larger and less numerous; usually only 1 to 3 are seen per snake; they are flat, attached firmly in place, and often resemble the surrounding scales. Treatment is via careful removal with forceps, being sure to remove entire tick including the head.

INAPPETANCE: If the snake fails to eat within a reasonable time you must look for a cause. Check the cage temperature and look for signs of illness such as mouth rot or respiratory infection. Newly acquired snakes may be stressed and take time to adjust to the new cage. If the snake is about to shed it may not eat; check for cloudy eyes. Constipation may cause appetite loss; warm water baths stimulate defecation. Outdoor sunlight exposure (on warm days) may stimulate appetite. Often snakes will eat a gerbil when they refuse a mouse. If the problem persists seek veterinary care; B vitamin injections, tube feeding, and oral Flagyl often help.

SHEDDING: Young fast growing snakes may shed every few weeks; large snakes may shed only 1-2 times per year. Before shedding, a snake's eyes will cloud and it will stop eating. Warm water soaks or misting may aid shedding, but minimize handling as this may disrupt the shedding process. The eyes usually clear a day or two before shedding. Provide a rough object such as a log, rock or cinder block in the cage which the snake can wedge itself against; this makes shedding easier. Normal shed skin comes off in one piece. Weak or sick snakes may molt poorly, and you may have to gently help peel off loose skin. Low humidity or mite infestation may also produce poor shedding. If the eyes remain cloudy after shedding, then the eye caps may have failed to shed; these will need to be carefully removed by an experienced individual. Retained eye caps can cloud the vision and inhibit eating.