



Tips for you and your pet snake

Sound reptilian husbandry is the key to maintaining a healthy animal. Most of the health problems seen in snakes and other reptiles relate directly to inadequate management and nutritional practices. With the information in mind, you can help your pet to live as longer, healthier life.

This outline is a basic guide to snake care and should by no means replace a good herpetology reference or the advice of a North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian.

General

Snakes can be found on every continent except Antarctica. They may be terrestrial (land dwelling), aquatic (fresh water dwelling), marine (sea water dwelling) or arboreal (tree dwelling).

Physically snakes differ from other species of reptiles in that they are legless and lack movable eyelids and an external ear opening. Their life span can be as long as thirty or forty years. Each species varies in its' physical and psychological needs. The new reptile owner should therefore research the housing and nutritional needs of their particular species.

Environment-General

Snakes will utilize both horizontal and vertical space in their enclosure. The snake should be able to stretch out and move about the cage freely. Aquariums or a (polyurethane) wood and Plexiglas enclosure work well for most reptile species. Avoid the use of wire or large gauge screening, as snakes will often rub or strike and cause facial lesions. Be sure to tape or lock the lid of the enclosure, as snakes are apt to escape.

Cage Substrate

Newspaper or Astroturf are suitable substrates for snakes, Astroturf may even assist the snake with the shedding process. Regardless of which substrate you choose, it should be removed and cleaned as soon as it is soiled. The enclosure and all props should be cleaned with a very dilute chlorine bleach and water solution once every one or two weeks.

Cage Accessories-General

Most species of snakes will benefit from the addition of clean, non-resinous branches. The climbing branches should be firmly anchored and large enough to support the snake's body weight. You can assist your snake your snake while it is shedding by providing rocks to rub on and a large water bowl to soak in. Most snakes need a quiet, isolated place to call their own. Offering some type of "hide box" gives the reptile some visual security. This can also be achieved with silk plants or cage "litter." Desert species

prefer sand litter, burrowing species prefer leaf litter and/or potting soil (making sure to remove decaying matter frequently).

Heating-General

Snakes are poikilothermic, meaning they require an outside source of heat to regulate their body temperature. A temperature gradient should be made available within the cage. This can be accomplished by placing a heating pad **under** (not in) half of the enclosure. Commercially available "hot rocks" may be used with a large flat "natural" rock placed on top of it (to avoid thermal burns). A heat lamp placed outside of the cage can provide a comfortable overall temperature. The optimum temperature varies with the species; however, most species do quite well at 75 - 80 degrees F. Tropical species require a slightly higher temperature of 75 - 95 degrees F. For all species we recommend the use of a thermometer inside the cage to carefully monitor any fluctuation in temperature.

Lighting-General

A "Vita-Lite" or "Black light" is absolutely essential to reptile husbandry. Reptiles **must** be exposed to the full spectrum of light for at least 12 hours per day. A black light may be substituted for the vita-lite with a 30 minute exposure time per day. Snakes should not be allowed access to the bulb, as burns may result. The light should be shielded from the snake by using a soft plastic mesh or screen. Glass or plastic shields should not be used because they filter out important ultraviolet light. The bulb should be replaced every 6 months to provide the optimum spectrum of light.

The Vita-lite should be placed no more than four feet above the snake. Natural sunlight on warm (not hot!) days is the best choice. Make sure to provide a shady spot with a bath towel so the snake can cool down if need be. Natural sunlight will sometimes entice an anorexic snake to eat. You may also find that your snake will be more active and even aggressive after sunlight exposure. Make sure to provide your snake with approximately 12 hours of darkness per day.

Humidity

Humidity needs vary with the species, ranging from 35 to 70%. Desert species require levels on the low end of the range and jungle species on the high end of the range. Most species tend to do well between 60 - 70% humidity. Means of delivering water to the enclosure include plant misters, water dishes and swim dishes. Some species enjoy frequent swimming. A bathtub or large sink filled with tepid water provides a nice large swim area. Maintaining proper humidity levels will assist your snake during the shedding process.

Diet

Determine your snake's dietary needs will require a knowledge of the species needs. Regardless of the type of snake you own **DO NOT FEED LIVE PREY** (other than insects) to your snake. Severe injuries and infections can occur due to the prey animal biting and chewing on the snake. The size of what you feed and how often will depend

on the time of year and whether the snake is young or mature. Generally speaking, snakes should be fed once every 1 - 2 weeks. Refer to the table below.

Shedding

Healthy snakes shed their skin 4 - 8 times per year. The frequency of shedding depends on many factors including: humidity, temperature, growth rate, feeding frequency and age. Snakes should shed in one piece beginning with the nostrum (nose) and ending with the tail. Patchy shedding and/or retained eye caps are abnormal. The shed is preceded by a 1 - 2 week period of opacity during which the skin becomes a dull and dry and the eye scales become milky in color. Your snake should not be handled while its opaque for several reasons. The snake tends to be more defensive or unpredictable due to its reduced vision. You may also inadvertently damage the underlying “new” skin by manipulation of the snake

Handling

Your snake will benefit from regular handling if it is done properly and at the right times. You should not handle your snake for 24 to 48 hours after feeding as this may cause regurgitation. As previously noted do not handle a snake while it is opaque. Always handle your snake with two hands, making sure to support its’ entire spine.

Sign of Illness

Open mouth breathing, wheezing, nasal discharge, excess salivation, long term food refusal, inactivity, abnormal feces, difficulty shedding, swellings, visible lesions and parasites. If any of these signs become evident in your snake, please see us as soon as possible. Snakes, like dogs and cats, benefit from an annual examination by your veterinarian.

Diet of the snake	Rodents	Crickets/ grasshoppers	Birds	Snakes/ lizards	Fish	Toads/ Frogs	Slugs/ Worms	Salamanders
Boa, Python, Rat, Gopher, Bull	Yes		Yes	Yes				
Garter, Ribbon & Water					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Indigo, Racers & King		Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	
Ring-neck, & Brown					Yes			Yes
Racers, Coachwhips & Vine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes				

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From Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine