

Caring for Your Snake



Snake Basics

Snakes make excellent pets. They are easy to care for, clean, quiet, and do not require frequent interaction. In addition, they require a limited amount of special equipment for proper care and handling.

It is important to understand that the proper care of snakes cannot be generalized. Certain species require specialized handling, so research the species to get specific information on the proper care of your pet.

To provide optimal care for your snake, it is necessary to replicate its natural environment as closely as possible. Do research on your snake to determine its natural habitat, such as fields, marshes, meadows, tropical forests or deserts.

Housing

Aquariums, with a locked screen cover, are ideal enclosures for your snake. They will retain the heat that cold-blooded animals need, in addition to providing maximum visibility and adequate ventilation. Snakes utilize both vertical and horizontal surfaces and should be provided sufficient space for them to stretch out and move freely

within its enclosure. An aquarium that is longer and deeper than it is tall is best, unless you are planning to keep an arboreal species such as a rough green snake, a ribbon snake or a tree boa that require height for climbing.

Avoid an enclosure with wire on the side walls because snakes may strike at the wire or rub against it, causing damage to its face or skin.

Screen covers designed for security are a necessity. Make sure the enclosure has an adequate locking system. Snakes are escape artists and can climb up glass walls, push open covers, and squeeze through small openings.

Environment

The interior of your snake's home can be as simple or as elaborate as you like, as long as it conforms to a few basic needs.

No matter the species, a clean and dry environment is the most important factor in maintaining a healthy snake. Your enclosure should be planned and designed with this in mind. Even water snakes, garters, and other species from high humidity micro-climates, must have a dry space within the enclosure.

A simple enclosure can contain nothing more than a newspaper substrate, a heavy water dish sufficient in size for drinking and soaking, and a hiding place. Depending on the specific species of snake you have selected, you may want to include cypress bark, grapevine branches, driftwood, hollowed cholla branches, aspen shavings, silica sand, stones and rocks, or dry leaves to create a natural environment. Desert species prefer sand while burrowing species like potting soil, leaf or litter.

It is important to including a hiding place in the enclosure. They enjoy coiling in a tight hiding place that might seem barely big enough for them to fit into. When including branches and other climbing devices, ensure they are securely anchored and strong enough to hold the snake.

Water

A heavy, shallow water dish with fresh water is important for drinking and soaking. If you cannot provide a dish large enough for the snake to completely submerge itself, it would be a good idea to allow for weekly soakings in a special plastic container where he can move about, soak, relax and shed its skin or relieve itself if necessary. Some small or tropical species enjoy drinking from artificial rainfalls in the form of misting with a spray bottle. Always keep the water clean and fresh. Change it regularly.

Diet

All snakes are carnivorous. In captivity, they typically eat mice, rats, chicks, fish, eggs, red worms, and crickets. Nightcrawlers and minnows are fed to water snakes and garters. Live crickets, earthworms, insects and caterpillars are fed to green, decay, and ringneck snakes. Hognose snakes only eat toads while many desert species only eat lizards. Bird eggs, and even birds, are common diets for other species. Most

This information is designed as a basic guide. There are several books and online resources available which provide in-depth information on snakes and their care.

snake species that naturally prefer to eat amphibians, reptiles or birds usually can be trained to eat rodents. The type of feed and how often you feed will vary depending on the species, age of the snake, and the time of year. Normally, snakes should be fed once every 1 to 2 weeks.

Your snake's jaw can expand allowing it to consume a rodent that is larger than the size of its head, but a rule of thumb is to never feed a prey item that is much thicker than the thickest point of the snake's body. Whenever possible feed frozen rodents rather than live. They are safer and healthier to feed than live rodents that may bite in self-defense and injure your snake. Also, most internal or external parasites the prey item might carry will have been killed by the freezing process. Before feeding your snake, thaw the rodent until it is slightly warmer than room temperature. Do not thaw the rodent in areas used for food preparation.

Temperature

Most snakes require a constant ambient temperature between 75°F and 85°F. It is best, however, to provide a slight temperature variation throughout the enclosure. This can be achieved by the strategic placement of an under-aquarium heating pad and an incandescent reptile light fixture with a spot light or ceramic heater. By placing the hiding place in the cooler corner, your snake can change his own micro-climate as it desires.

Tropical species require slightly higher temperatures ranging up to 90°F in the basking area and higher humidity (75-90%).

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Handling

Before removing your snake from its environment, make sure it is awake to avoid startling it (snakes have no eyelids to close while sleeping). It is important to let your snake know it is time to be handled and not time to be fed. You can accomplish this by gently moving the snake with an object such as a snake hook. Once the snake is alert to your presence and is not expecting to be fed, you may pick the snake up by gently grasping it mid-body with both hands and supporting as much of its length across your hands and arms as possible. It is important to be aware of where the snake's head is at all times: you can avoid it moving into small openings while watching for signs that it is becoming agitated and should be returned to its habitat. More than one person should be involved when handling larger specimens over 6 feet in length. Minors should only handle snakes under adult supervision

Keeping You and Your Snake Healthy

Good hygiene, care and handling will help prevent illness in your pets, and reduce the chance of your snake transmitting disease to humans. Along with providing the proper diet, temperature, and humidity, follow these steps to maintain your pet's health.

- ✓ Spot clean the enclosure daily and remove droppings. Weekly maintenance should include thoroughly cleaning the branches and rocks, turning the substrate, removing any large clumps, and wiping down the glass.

- ✓ Snakes should be handled with care and adult supervision. Sudden movements may startle a snake causing it to strike defensively, which may result in serious injury. It is always important to wash your hands with an anti-bacterial soap after handling your snake.

- ✓ All bowls, dishes, and bottles should be cleaned daily and disinfected weekly.

Avoiding Human Illness

Reptiles may have bacteria, such as *Salmonella*, that can cause disease in humans. Fortunately, taking a few simple precautions will keep you healthy when handling reptiles:

- ✓ Always wash your hands with soap and water before and after handling reptiles or anything in their habitat.

- ✓ Avoid close facial contact with all reptiles.

- ✓ Never use food-preparation areas to clean reptile habitats or anything in their habitats. If you clean the habitat in the bathroom, disinfect the area completely afterwards.

Children under 5, pregnant women, senior citizens, and people with weakened immune systems run a greater risk of infection; contact your health care provider for more information.

