

CARE OF SNAKES IN CAPTIVITY

SOME GUIDELINES

Information for the Pet Reptile Owner

A snake is one of the more common reptiles seen at our Hospital.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Snakes require special effort to meet their body's needs in terms of nutrition, temperature, humidity and lighting.

Most people use an aquarium. A high sided 20 gallon one is a good beginning, although a larger one may be necessary. The terrium should be at least as wide as the snake is long. The terrium's length should be twice as long as the snake.

Most snakes sleep up to ten hours per day so the lighting must allow at least ten hours of darkness. Temperatures should be kept at 75-80 degrees Fahrenheit at night and 85-90 degrees Fahrenheit during the day. An accurate thermometer is very helpful. A more efficient way to allow these cold-blooded creatures to self-regulate their body temperature is as follows.

One way to allow the snake to self-regulate its body temperature is to divide the aquarium into 'zones'. One-third of the aquarium is 'hot'; one-third is 'medium'; one-third is 'cool'. The 'hot' side is where the heat source is. You can use lamps, under the cage warmers or hot rocks. Be careful of hot rocks, the electrical wiring can short out and produce a very 'hot' spot that may burn your reptile. The goal is to have the snake spend most of the time in the 'medium' zone. That way it can move to the 'hot' or 'cool' zones as needed to regulate its body temperature. If the snake is spending most of the time in the 'cool' zone, then the aquarium is too hot overall. If the snake is spending most of the time in the 'hot' zone, then the aquarium is too cool overall. Make appropriate changes in the heat source to compensate. The 'medium' zone should contain the water (in a large enough container to soak in) and the food. Spraying your snake can help maintain its hydration. Use fresh water and spray several times a week. You may need to do this more often in the dry winter months.

The lining to the cage should be easy to clean or change, non-abrasive and economical. Newspaper fits all these requirements. When the sheet is soiled, discard it. Astroturf-like materials can be used, but they need to be washed in bleach frequently to maintain hygiene. Larger snakes may do better in an organic cellulose fiber animal bedding (Shepherd Speciality Papers, Kalamazoo, MI).

Snakes need a source of ultraviolet light to activate Vitamin D3 in their skin. Vitamin D3 is used to maintain strong bones. Natural sunlight and/or fluorescent ultraviolet light (such as Vita-lite) should be available twelve to thirteen hours a day. Most high quality retile vitamins will contain Vitamin D3. If possible, check the expiration date and get the freshest batch available.

Cage mates are not recommended. Most reptiles are not social animals. Handling should be kept to a minimum.



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91 North Stark Highway
Weare, New Hampshire
(603) 529 - 4999

Snakes that are to be used for reproduction should be forced into hibernation by slowly decreasing the amount of light and temperature daily.

DIET

Diet induced problems are the number one cause of disease in the snakes we see here at the Hospital. The best diet is one that closely approximates the 'natural' diet.

Snakes are carnivores and therefore should be fed whole, pre-killed prey such as mice, rats or chicks. Do not feed raw hamburger or the like.

Feeding live food can cause problems for the snake if the mice or rat decides to defend itself and cause bite wounds on the snake. Some snakes do need the 'chase' to stimulate their feeding habits.

Complete vitamin and mineral supplements are a must. Use reptile vitamins that contain Vitamin D3.

MOUTH ROT

Mouth rot (also called ulcerative stomatitis) is caused by a bacteria that thrives in unhealthy tissues. A snake's mouth is prone to become one of these unhealthy tissue sites when the following occur:

- ☞ temperatures are too cool for the snake's metabolism to adequately work. Normal antibacterial defenses in the mouth are impaired and the snake's immune system is not operating at one hundred percent.
- ☞ the snake is ill from another disease.
- ☞ the environment is dirty, serving as a breeding ground for bacteria.
- ☞ the snake consistently strikes the cage walls causing tissue damage.

Treatment consists of both topical cleaning and medicating along with systemic antibiotics. Some snakes need aggressive fluid therapy and maybe an incubator to maintain body temperature. This can be a **FATAL** disease!

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

There are a variety of books written about care of snakes. There are also herpetological societies where you can become a member and these societies publish handbooks, etc. for their members.

One such society is the Chicago Herpetological Society (write to: Membership Secretary, Chicago Herpetological Society, 2001 North Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois 60614) which publishes information on reptiles.



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