



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.

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. Ask your pet retailer for your snake's specific environmental requirements, and for recommendations on books and online resources about the species.

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

HABITAT

Aquariums or terrariums with integrated screen covers or high-density plastic (HDPE or PVC) enclosures designed for reptiles 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 their enclosure should provide sufficient space to stretch out and move freely. An enclosure that is longer and deeper than it is tall is preferred, unless you are planning to keep an arboreal species that requires height for climbing. See the table for habitat size recommendations. Avoid an enclosure with wire on the side walls because snakes may strike at the wire or rub against it, causing damage to their 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 push open covers and squeeze through small openings. Unlike most other reptile pets, snakes should be housed alone.

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 environment with appropriate temperature and humidity is the most important factor in maintaining a healthy snake. Even water snakes, Garter Snakes, and other species from high humidity 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 species of snake you have selected, you may 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 or leaf litter. Avoid cedar wood and shavings that are toxic.

It is important to include a hiding place in the enclosure. Snakes 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 your dish is not large enough for the snake to completely submerge itself, use a special plastic container weekly so your pet 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. Change the water and clean the dish regularly.

DIET

All snakes are carnivorous. In captivity, they typically eat mice, rats, chicks, fish, eggs, red worms, and crickets. Most snake species that naturally prefer to eat amphibians, reptiles or birds usually can be trained to eat rodents. The type of food 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 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 wider than the thickest point of the snake's body. Whenever possible feed frozen rodents: they are safer and healthier 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 human food preparation.

TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY

Snakes need a temperature gradient of 10-15°F across their habitat. A heating pad placed underneath the floor at one end of the enclosure should be sufficient to provide a warm area, while a hiding place in the cooler corner allows your snake to seek the temperature it desires. Incandescent reptile light fixtures with a spotlight or ceramic heater are an option for maintaining the appropriate temperature.

Humidity requirements vary by species, ranging from 50-60% for tropical species like Boa Constrictors from Central and South America to 10-30% for desert species, e.g., Sand Boas native to northern Africa. For most snakes, their water dish is adequate for humidity needs. If your climate is very dry, use a spray bottle to mist the habitat occasionally but avoid soaking the substrate, which can lead to fungus and health problems.

Snakes should have several hours of natural light each day. Ultraviolet (UV-B) lights are not needed, unless your snake's habitat is in a place without natural sunlight.

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 it 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 to avoid its moving into small openings. Watch for signs that your snake is becoming agitated and should be returned to its habitat. More than one person should be involved when handling specimens longer than 6 feet. Minors should not handle snakes without 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

Snakes may carry bacteria, such as *Salmonella*, that can cause disease in humans. Check the CDC [Healthy Pets, Healthy People](#) website for information on steps you can take to stay healthy around your snake.

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.

