



CARING FOR SNAKES

MANUAL FOR NEW SNAKE OWNERS

Snakes can make fascinating pets due to their unique appearance, calm demeanor, and relatively low maintenance requirements. However, they do have specific care needs that must be met to ensure their health and well-being. This manual will guide you on how to care for your pet snake, from creating the right environment to feeding and health care. With the proper care, your snake can live a long, healthy, and content life.

HOUSING YOUR SNAKE

Why It's Important: A suitable habitat is essential for your snake's health and comfort. Snakes are sensitive to environmental factors like temperature, humidity, and space. A well-maintained enclosure will mimic their natural habitat and help reduce stress.

Tank Size:

- **Size of Enclosure:** The size of the enclosure will depend on the species of snake you have. A general guideline is that the length of the enclosure should be at least as long as the snake's body (though longer is better). For example, a 20-gallon tank is suitable for smaller species like corn snakes or ball pythons, while larger snakes like boa constrictors or pythons may require a 75-gallon or larger tank.
- **Secure Lid:** Snakes are escape artists! Ensure the tank has a secure lid or top to prevent your snake from escaping.

Temperature and Lighting:

- **Temperature Gradient:** Snakes are ectothermic (cold-blooded), meaning they rely on their environment to regulate their body temperature. The tank should have a temperature gradient, with a warm basking spot and a cooler side. Generally, the basking area should be between 85°F and 95°F (29°C–35°C), and the cooler side should be between 75°F and 85°F (24°C–29°C). Use a heat lamp, heat pad, or ceramic heat emitter to create the warmth.
- **Nighttime Temperature:** Keep the night temperature between 70°F and 75°F (21°C–24°C). Avoid extreme temperature fluctuations.
- **UVB Light:** Most snakes do not require UVB lighting like reptiles such as lizards, but providing indirect natural light can be beneficial. However, certain species like the ball python or green tree pythons can benefit from UVB light, especially if they are not exposed to natural sunlight.

Humidity:

- **Humidity Needs:** Snakes come from various climates, so their humidity needs vary. Species like the corn snake require moderate humidity (40%–60%), while others, such as the ball python or rainforest-dwelling species like the emerald tree boa, prefer higher humidity (50%–70%). Use a hygrometer to monitor the humidity levels in the enclosure and adjust as necessary with a water bowl or by misting.

Substrate:

- **Suitable Bedding:** Choose substrates that are safe and easy to clean. Aspen shavings, cypress mulch, reptile carpet, or newspaper are good options. Avoid using cedar or pine wood chips, as these can release harmful oils that are toxic to snakes. For species that need more humidity, coconut husk or sphagnum moss can be used, as they help retain moisture.

FEEDING YOUR SNAKE

Why It's Important: A proper diet is crucial for your snake's growth, health, and well-being. Snakes are carnivores, and they typically eat whole prey such as rodents, birds, or reptiles, depending on the species. Providing the right food and feeding schedule will help your snake thrive.

Diet:

- **Types of Food:** The diet of your snake will depend on its species. Most pet snakes eat rodents, such as mice or rats, but larger snakes may eat rabbits or even birds. Ensure the prey size is appropriate to the snake's size (the prey should be no larger than the widest part of the snake's body). Always feed frozen/thawed prey to avoid injury to your snake.
- **Feeding Frequency:**
 - **Juvenile Snakes:** Younger snakes will need to eat more frequently, usually every 4-5 days.
 - **Adult Snakes:** Adult snakes generally need to be fed every 7-14 days, depending on their species and size. Some large snakes may only need to be fed every 2-4 weeks.
- **Feeding Method:** Always feed your snake in a separate container to prevent them from associating you with feeding time. Use tongs to offer the prey to your snake, and never feed your snake live prey, as it could result in injury.

Water:

- Provide a clean water bowl at all times. Snakes drink regularly, and some species may soak in the water bowl to help with shedding and regulate their body temperature. Ensure the water is always fresh and clean.

SHEDDING & SKIN CARE

Why It's Important: Snakes shed their skin as they grow, and maintaining proper humidity and conditions can make the shedding process easier and healthier for them.

Shedding Process:

- **Signs of Shedding:** Before shedding, your snake may become less active, and their skin will appear dull or cloudy. Their eyes may also look blue or milky before they shed.
- **Humidity:** To assist with the shedding process, increase the humidity slightly by misting the enclosure or adding a humid hide (a moist hidebox). Ensure that your snake has access to a water bowl large enough to soak in during the shedding period.
- **Post-Shed Care:** Once your snake sheds, inspect their skin to ensure it was fully shed. Retained skin around the eyes or tail can be a sign of improper humidity or dehydration and may require assistance.

ENVIRONMENT ENRICHMENT

Why It's Important: Although snakes don't need toys or complex enrichment, providing a few environmental enhancements can reduce stress and allow for natural behaviors like climbing, burrowing, or hiding.

Environmental Enrichment Ideas:

- **Climbing and Hiding:** Depending on the species, snakes may enjoy climbing or burrowing. Provide branches, rocks, and hides to encourage these natural behaviors.
- **Varied Terrain:** Use different types of substrates and objects to mimic the snake's natural environment. For example, create a basking area with smooth stones or branches, or add moss for moisture-loving species.

HEALTH CARE

Why It's Important: Regular health monitoring is essential for preventing or catching any diseases early, ensuring your snake remains healthy and happy.

Common Health Problems:

- **Respiratory Infections:** Symptoms include wheezing, bubbling at the nostrils, and lethargy. Respiratory infections are usually caused by poor temperature or humidity conditions and require veterinary attention.
- **Mites and Parasites:** Snakes can suffer from external parasites (mites) or internal parasites (worms). Mites can be treated with a reptile-safe mite treatment, while internal parasites may require a fecal exam and deworming from your veterinarian.
- **Skin Problems:** Improper humidity can cause shedding problems or skin infections. Ensure that your snake's environment is properly maintained for humidity and temperature.
- **Obesity:** Snakes can become overweight if fed excessively or on the wrong feeding schedule. Monitor your snake's weight and avoid overfeeding.
- **Burns:** Burns can happen if the heat source is too close to the snake's body. Always maintain the proper temperature gradient and use a thermostat to regulate the heat source.

Veterinary Care:

- **Regular Check-ups:** A veterinarian experienced in reptiles should be consulted for regular check-ups, especially if you notice any abnormal behavior, appetite changes, or signs of illness.
- **Quarantine New Snakes:** If introducing a new snake to your collection, quarantine it for at least 30 days to ensure it is healthy and free of disease or parasites.

HANDLING & INTERACTION

Why It's Important: While snakes are not generally "cuddly" pets, many enjoy gentle handling and interaction, which helps build trust between you and your pet. However, it's important to handle them appropriately and in a way that minimizes stress.

Handling Tips:

- **How to Handle Your Snake:** Always handle your snake with both hands, supporting its body fully. Let the snake move through your hands rather than holding it tightly. Avoid sudden or jerky movements, as this can stress the snake.
- **Frequency of Handling:** Handling should be kept to a few short sessions per week to allow your snake to become accustomed to your touch. Overhandling or forcing interaction can stress the snake.
- **Time to Avoid Handling:** Avoid handling your snake immediately after it has eaten, as this can cause stress or digestive issues.

Caring for a snake requires knowledge of their specific needs in terms of habitat, diet, and health care. By providing the right environment, a proper diet, and routine monitoring of their health, you can ensure your pet snake lives a long, healthy, and happy life. Regular observation, proper handling, and timely vet visits will help you catch potential problems early. With patience and care, your snake can make a fascinating and rewarding pet.