



info@aeacarizona.com

Address:
1911 South Lindsay Road
Mesa, AZ 85204

Phone: (480)706-8478
Fax: (480)393-3915
After Hours **Emergency Paging System**
(pages answered every night until 10 pm!)

Care of the Corn Snake - *Elaphe guttata*

With 50 or more different color and pattern varieties currently bred in captivity, the corn snake is a favorite among reptile hobbyists and herpetoculturists. Its moderate size (30 - 48 in at maturity), gentle disposition, and ease of care make the corn snake well suited for the beginner and expert alike. The corn snake, *E. g. guttata*, and its western subspecies, the Great Plains rat snake, *E. g. emoryi*, occur naturally throughout much of the eastern and Midwestern United States.

Selection - Captive-bred corn snakes are generally superior in health, appearance, and temperament than their wild counterparts. When selecting a pet, it is best to observe the snake from a distance before examining it more closely. If possible, watch the snake eat; this is especially important when purchasing a hatchling.

A healthy corn snake moves deliberately when held. The eyes should be bright and clear, and the tongue should flick actively. The skin should be shiny and free of wounds, lumps, and scars. The muscular body of the corn snake resembles a loaf of bread in cross-section. The mouth should close firmly and lack evidence of wounds and discharge. Listen carefully as the snake breathes to assess for whistling, crackling, or gurgling, all signs of potential respiratory problems.

Housing- Cages housing corn snakes must be escape-proof and constructed with smooth, waterproof sides and bottoms. Aquariums with latching or sliding lids, as well as many of the commercially available plastic cages, are suitable. Hatchlings may be kept in 10-gallon tanks or large plastic terraria. A single adult corn snake can be comfortably housed in a 20-gal long aquarium, although larger cages are preferred. Corn snakes should be housed singly when not paired for breeding. Separation allows the keeper to more closely monitor the behavior and health of each specimen.

The cage floor should be covered with a material that allows for burrowing and easy spot removal of wastes. Newspaper, AstroTurf, processed paper pulp, cypress mulch, and aspen shavings can all be used with success. A hide box or shelter is recommended; if newspaper or AstroTurf is used as a substrate, a hide box must be provided. Inverted plant saucers with entry holes, toilet paper tubes, hollow or concave wood or bark slabs, and many other products manufactured for this purpose can serve as hide boxes.

A broad bowl filled with clean, fresh water should be provided. Because they occur in the humid parts of the United States, corn snakes require more humidity than is found in most homes for adequate hydration and normal shedding. Hatchling corn snakes are especially sensitive to dehydration.

Additional cage furnishings can include stout branches, rocks, and sturdy plants. In addition to increasing a cage's aesthetic appeal, these items facilitate the formation of gradients in heat, light, and humidity. Naturalistic enclosures may also promote natural foraging, thermoregulating, and breeding behaviors.

Corn snakes fare well in a temperature range of 22 - 32°C (72 - 90°F). One end of the cage should be kept at the lower end of this range and the other should provide a focal hot spot at or slightly above 32°C (90°F). Providing such a thermal gradient allows snakes to regulate their body temperature precisely. Because wild corn snakes thermoregulate primarily by hiding beneath tree bark or surface debris that is warmed by the sun, an overhead heat source is preferred over under-cage heat sources.

While it does not appear that corn snakes require ultraviolet B radiation for vitamin D3 synthesis, exposure to ultraviolet A (UVA) radiation may be beneficial when trying to stimulate social and reproductive behaviors.

Diet - Corn snakes are strict carnivores that kill their prey by constriction prior to ingestion. The diet of wild corn snakes includes lizards, treefrogs, rodents, birds, and bird eggs. In captivity, most hatchlings accept live or thawed frozen nestling ("pink") mice. Certain genetic lines, including "bloodred" and "Miami" phases, are considered to be "finicky" strains and may require special foods or feeding techniques as hatchlings.

Captive adult corn snakes, with few exceptions, readily accept pre-killed or thawed frozen mice and rats of appropriate size. Feeding pre-killed prey is preferred to prevent dangerous wounds to the snake. If live prey is to be fed, it should never be left in the cage unobserved; a snake that is not hungry can be killed by its intended prey.

Frozen rodents should be sealed in a plastic bag and thawed rapidly in hot water. Feed only high-quality rodents; malnourished prey animals are likely to pass nutritional deficiencies along to the predator. Supplementation with vitamins and minerals is generally unnecessary when whole prey is being fed to carnivores.

Snakes housed on a particulate substrate should be moved to a bare feeding enclosure to prevent ingestion of the ground medium. Rapidly growing hatchling and juvenile corn snakes should be fed every five to seven days. Mature adults may be fed weekly to monthly.

Preventive Health Care and Diseases - It is critical that you learn as much as possible about any reptile pet before obtaining one. Research the specific needs of corn snakes using periodicals, books, on-line resources, and the advice of experienced reptile breeders and veterinarians. A qualified reptile veterinarian should perform a post-purchase health exam shortly after your new pet arrives. This office visit should include a thorough physical exam, a fecal analysis to check for internal parasites, and counseling on proper husbandry and diet. Having your veterinarian perform an annual physical examination throughout your snake's life can aid in the early detection and correction of both husbandry and medical problems.

Careful attention to environmental conditions such as temperature and humidity will help minimize the risk of your pet becoming sick. Seek the assistance of a veterinarian skilled in reptile care if any of the following symptoms are observed:

- Refusal to feed for two or more consecutive scheduled feedings
- Failure to produce stool within seven to ten days after feeding
- Difficulty shedding, retained spectacles "eye caps"
- Abdominal swelling
- Regurgitation (vomiting)
- Diarrhea or foul-smelling stool; straining to pass stool
- Open-mouthed breathing, difficulty breathing
- Discharge from the eyes, nostrils, or mouth
- Weakness, lethargy, depression, or inactivity
- Lumps, bumps, scabs, or cuts on the skin

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William G. Griswold, DVM

Elliot Park Animal Hospital
1700 E Elliot Road, Suite 19
Tempe, AZ 85284, USA

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