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Skin Shedding in Snakes

Shedding of the reptilian skin is referred to as the process of ecdysis. Snakes will normally shed their skin in one piece. Any variation from normal ecdysis is referred to as dysecdysis or difficult shedding. Ecdysis is a normal process in all animals, including humans. Most animals slough their skin continuously and in small and unnoticeable amounts. Snakes have developed a different technique to shedding.

Snakes may shed 4 to 12 times a year depending on its age and how often it eats. Snakes are able to grow when they shed their skins. The new skin is stretchable and allows for a larger body size than the previous skin. Younger snakes should shed more frequently as they are in a more rapid growth phase. Snakes have no eyelids and rely on the overlying skin to keep their eyes moist. The skin over the eye is known as the spectacle and is normally shed with the rest of the skin.

You can tell when snakes are approaching ecdysis or shedding when their skin becomes dull and their spectacles or eye caps turn a blue color. This process is called going "opaque." The snake often becomes very irritable during this 4 to 7 day opaque period, refuses to eat, and may strike. The snake's skin is very tender during this time because the new skin is incompletely formed and tender. Touching or holding the snake at this time is not recommended even if your snake does not strike at you. You may cause the old skin to prematurely rip, which will result in dysecdysis. The snake's eyes clear up for a period of about 4 days before actual shedding (ecdysis) begins. A shedding snake will rub its face and nose on abrasive objects in order to start the shed. The snake will then literally crawl out of its skin like an inside-out sock.

As mentioned before, if the skin fails to come off in one piece, it is called dysecdysis. There are many reasons for dysecdysis and most of them are related to the captive environment. A big problem for snakes is cage humidity. If the air in the cage is too dry, then the old skin does not separate properly from the new skin. This is particularly a problem in the winter months or in extremely arid environments. This problem can be prevented if the water bowl is moved closer to the heat source, which will lead more water to evaporate into the cage air. Another cause of dysecdysis results from not having abrasive materials in the cage. Rocks, bricks, and branches can be added so the snake can better begin the shedding process.

Snakes may also shed improperly due to being infested with snake mites. Snakes most often retain their spectacles as a result of inflammation around the eye caused by the mite. The best way to treat this problem is to get rid of the mites. Your veterinarian can help you solve this problem.

After the underlying problem with difficult shedding is solved, the snake must often be assisted in shedding the rest of the skin. I recommend placing the snake in a dampened pillowcase in a sweater box container for about a two-hour period. The skin at that time should be sufficiently moist to manually peel off. Retained eye caps or spectacles may need extra care. Massaging the eye with moistened cotton swabs gently will loosen the skin over the eye. Gentle traction with small tweezers or forceps will result in complete shedding. Blindness may result if the spectacle is pulled on too hard due to the eye drying out. Consult your veterinarian to prevent this problem.

Besides cosmetic appearances of unshed skin, two other processes make dysecdysis a serious problem. Dead skin over the tail of snakes acts as a band that cuts off the blood supply. This may even lead the snake to lose the tail. Snakes that do not shed properly do not eat properly. Retained eye caps or spectacles shrink, and the snake cannot see the prey item. Another common area snakes have difficulty shedding is under the chin. The snake may be able to kill the prey by constricting around the mouse but is unable to swallow the mouse because the dead skin restricts the jaw from unhinging (disarticulation).

Trauma to the skin and thyroid gland abnormalities are not common reasons for dysecdysis and infrequently result in difficult shedding. Consult your veterinarian with any problems or questions regarding shedding.