



## 5 Tips for Taking Care of Your Snake

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This is general information that will help you keep a pet snake happy and healthy. It is designed to be used together with a care sheet that gives information more specific to the kind of snake you are keeping. If you get a snake from us, we will always have a care sheet specific to that species.

1

**Movement and handling** – Many snakes stay on the move, although some will get used to handling and stay pretty quiet in the hand. Do not try to squeeze and restrain it to make it stay still. On the other hand, be careful not to let it get away from you, because snakes can quickly escape. Let the snake rest in your hands, and keep giving it support as it moves. Position your hands so that the snake can keep moving a little and is always crawling onto your free hand. Use a little bit of pressure to slow it or limit its movement. At first, practice handling over a container, so that if the snake gets away it drops only a few inches into a contained space. Do not handle the snake for very long at a time. They may tolerate handling and may like exercise, but too much handling is stressful for the snake. A nervous snake may sometimes bite. Just remember that smaller nonvenomous snakes make small scratches or shallow punctures in the skin that ordinarily will not do any real damage. Try not to be startled and pull away, as this hurts you and the snake more. Their teeth are small but very sharp and curved back, which is nature's way of helping them hold onto food. Even nervous snakes often do not bite if you slide your hands under them and give them lots of support and no "target" to strike at. **Do not** handle a hungry snake if you smell like its food, because you may be bitten in the mistaken believe that you are good to eat!

2

**Feeding** – All snakes eat other animals, and in the wild they swallow them whole. The exact kind of food may be different from one kind of snake to the other. Although snakes can swallow very big items, it is best to give food that is no bigger around than the middle section of the snake. Snakes do not have to eat daily, but how often you feed will depend on the type of snake and the type of food. If you are feeding mice or rats to the snakes, give *prekilled* rather than live ones (with few exceptions). Never leave a live mouse or rat with a snake unattended, as the rodent can seriously injure or kill the snake. When snakes will not eat, try the following: (1) make sure the temperature is right for the snake, as cooler temperatures often discourage feeding; (2) if you are using thawed rodents, make sure the food is completely thawed and slightly warm; (3) make sure the snake is not stressed by people watching or other snakes in the same tank; (4) leave the snake and food item together in a cloth bag or a plastic dish (with ventilation holes) overnight in the snake's cage; (5) do not handle a picky eater for a day or two before offering food; (6) remember that snakes preparing to shed often do not eat. After the snake has eaten, *do not handle it* until the lump is almost gone, indicating that digestion is almost complete.

3

**Cages** – A cage needs to re-create a little bit of the snake's natural environment, but it does not have to look like the snake's natural habitat. It should provide a few props for the snake to explore, such as small rocks or branches. Additionally, the cage needs to do several very basic things:

- » **Prevent escape** - Snakes are amazing escape artists! They can squeeze through small openings and will push wire mesh if they can, even if it scratches and injures them. If you use a glass terrarium, it needs to have a top that fastens down in some way. You can buy terraria with molded sliding screen tops, or clear plastic ones with tops that snap in place. Some people use clear sweater boxes with small holes drilled in the sides, but the tops should either fasten securely or the box should be slid into a rack that prevents the top from being pushed up.
- » **Provide the right temperature** - Never leave a cage in direct sun, as it can overheat. On the other hand, the cage must stay warm enough for the snake to be active. For many snakes that temperature is around 80°F, but you *must* check what your particular species needs. Some people provide warmth from an under-tank heater (a thin pad that can be purchased from pet suppliers) or a heating pad on *low* under one side of the cage. (**Warning:** heating pads can be a fire hazard if misused – don't rest the weight of

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the cage on the heating pad.) Check the temperature with a thermometer – *don't just guess!* Avoid “hot rocks” or anything placed inside the cage that can overheat.

- » **Provide light and humidity** - It is desirable to have a fairly consistent cycle of daylight and darkness. Snakes do not need specialized ultraviolet (UV) lighting. For most snakes, high humidity is not needed, but most of our houses have dry air (as low as 15%) that is too low for many snakes. A room humidifier may help.
- » **Allow security** - Provide a hide box of some kind, which can be as simple as a cardboard box. It should be just big enough for the snake to curl up inside, in a dark protected place.
- » **Provide water** - With a few exceptions, snakes should have access to a small dish of clean water at all times. If the dish is made from heavy ceramic, this will minimize it getting turned over. It does not have to be big enough for the snake to swim in.
- » **Provide dry “substrate”** - The stuff the snake rests on – the substrate – needs to be dry and absorbent. Never use cedar shavings, which give off toxic fumes. Folded newspaper, shredded aspen bedding, or CareFresh®, can be good choices for many snakes. Unfortunately, using cypress mulch contributes to the destruction of our southern cypress wetland forests, so it is not a good choice.
- » **Allow enough space** - Some people use this as a general rule: the two sides of the cage floor added together should be at least as long as the snake would be, stretched out. However, different kinds of snakes need different amounts of space.

4

**Growth and shedding** – Snakes grow faster as babies and slow down later in life. Growth rate does depend on feeding, but don't try to artificially keep the snake small or “push” the snake to grow too fast. Give the amount of food that is right to keep the snake healthy. As they grow, snakes periodically shed their skin. They usually do this in one complete piece. First the snake's color becomes faded and “milky” or “bluish” as a new skin is formed. Then, the snake's color clears and in a few days shedding should occur. During this time the snake may not eat and may become “cranky”, and should be left alone. This is a good time to make sure the cage is not too dry, or shedding problems may result. *Let the snake do its own shedding*, because if you start it too early you will injure it. On the other hand, if the snake does not shed after a number of days or parts of the old skin stick and will not come off, you must help. Put the snake in a secure container with some water or with a wet towel, and let it stay there for a while. This generally does the trick.

5

**About Salmonella** – There is a chance of exposure to the *Salmonella* bacteria through handling reptiles. This can be a serious health threat to young children or those with compromised immune systems. Putting it in perspective, we are exposed to some risk of *Salmonella* exposure in daily life through such things as contact with uncooked chicken. Nevertheless, always wash your hands after handling reptiles and always supervise the handling of reptiles by children.

***This is only a beginning. Make sure to get more specific information on the kind of snake you are keeping.***

You can find us on the web at: [www.jsdragons.com](http://www.jsdragons.com).  
Remember that we will always have care sheets for the reptiles we offer.

Other good sources of information include herpetological societies such as the Dallas-Fort Worth Herpetological Society ([www.dfwherp.org](http://www.dfwherp.org))

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