

Snakes as Pets

History and Biology: Pet snakes come in a variety of sizes and temperaments. Most found in the pet trade are tolerant of people, although some make better pets than others. When considering a snake as a pet, it is important to consider the adult size of the species, as some become quite large. Snakes are found in almost all parts of the world. Some species are aquatic, while others are arboreal (live in trees). Many popular species are tropical or subtropical.

Venomous species of snakes are almost always aggressive and are not recommended as pets.

Housing:

- Snakes should have a large vivarium. Generally, these are longer and less tall than those made for fish. **Lids should be used and should be closed down with aluminum foil or plexi glass to help trap heat and humidity. Lids must be well-secured, as most snakes will try to push up on the vivarium lids with the top of their heads.** Up to 75 percent of the top can be closed off with aluminum foil.
- It is important to remember that a larger enclosure will require more heating to keep the snake at an appropriate ambient temperature.
- Substrate in the enclosure should be artificial turf or reptile carpet. Coconut husk, corn cob and play sand are not appropriate, and may cause gastrointestinal obstruction if ingested. Reptile sand, even if it is dissolvable, should also be avoided as it can also cause gastrointestinal obstruction, mouth rot, an infection of the mouth, and can scratch the eyes.

Heating and Lighting:

- Ideal temperatures will vary depending on the species of snake.
 - North American snakes = 72-80 degrees F
 - Subtropical snakes = 77-85 degrees F
 - Tropical snakes = 80-90 degrees F
- Temperature readings should be taken at several areas in the enclosure, including in the shade. The shade temperature is often the most accurate as it is not affected by heat lamps or heating pads.
- Temperatures that are too low or too high will cause decreased immune system function and metabolism, which leads to disease and failure to thrive.
- Heating for the habitat can be achieved through heat lamps or reptile heating pads placed under the vivarium. It is best to use heat lamps which emit no light. Ceramic heat lamps are readily available at most pet stores in the reptile section, or are available on-line. **Hot rocks should be avoided as they can cause burns.**
- Lighting requirements are variable depending on the species.
 - Boas and pythons generally do not need a UV source

- King snakes and smaller species **do require both visible “white” light, and ultraviolet (UV) light, specifically UV-B. UV-B is found in sunlight and is essential as it helps the snake synthesize vitamin D which aids in the absorption of dietary calcium.** Without UV-B, metabolic bone disease (hypocalcemia) will result.
- For all species, even those that do not require UV-B, a reptile light should be left on directly over the enclosure for 12-14 hours during the day. **For those species that do not require UV, addition of a UV source can help stimulate appetite and may have psychological and emotional benefit. If a snake has had UV light prior to adoption or purchase, he/she will require UV in order to thrive.**
- All UV lights are not equal. Some bulbs only provide UV-A which does not aid in synthesizing vitamin D, but may have some psychological and emotional benefits. High-quality broad-spectrum or full-spectrum fluorescent tube lights often provide good UV-B, though it is important to change these bulbs every 6-8 months as the lifespan of the UV-B spectrum is limited. It is important to remove any plexi-glass, glass or plastic shields which are often screwed into the fixture to provide more security for the bulb. UV-B rays will be blocked by the plexi glass, glass or plastic so the snake will not receive adequate UV-B.
- **As a general rule, incandescent bulbs do not provide adequate UV and should not be used as the only UV source.**

Humidity:

- Humidity aids in the process of shedding. Tropical and subtropical species do best in humidity which approaches 80 percent. Soaking the snake in a warm water bath outside of his/her regular enclosure, can help improve the shedding process.

Diet:

- **Snakes should be fed in a separate enclosure so the snake does not expect food in its regular vivarium and strike the owner due to anticipation of food. ALWAYS thoroughly wash your hands after handling prey items so the snake will not mistake your hand as prey.**
- **Uneaten prey, especially if it is live, should promptly be removed. Severe injury and even death may result if the prey starts feeding on the snake.**
- Snakes are carnivorous. Larger snakes eat adult mice, rats or gerbils and should be fed every other week to every two weeks. Smaller snakes will feed on insects or pinkie mice every 7-10 days. Very large snakes will eat rabbits, guinea pigs or multiple adult rats monthly.
- Frozen thawed prey has the advantage of carrying less disease, as the freezing-thawing process eliminates many parasites and reduces the risk of bites to the snake.

