

West End Veterinary Office

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BASIC CARE OF PET SNAKES

Most of the health problems seen in snakes today relate directly to inadequate management and dietary practices. Knowledge of the NATURAL HISTORY of each species is the key in designing a captive environment that will maintain a healthy animal and allow for a long life as a pet.

A common example of mismanagement is the Ball Python and the complaint that the animal refuses to eat. These are small (4-5 feet) grassland snakes from equatorial West Africa, which are still mostly imported for the pet trade. In the wild, these snakes are active mostly at dawn and dusk, eating brown rats, small boas, and gerbils (their preferred food). They naturally fast (do NOT eat) from October to March and during the winter dry season when they will breed and incubate their eggs. They hide in animal burrows at night in the heat of the day, and are typically solitary and shy. They are often heavily parasitized which, when added to the stress of capture can be overwhelming. They are stuffed in bags of 4-6 snakes, shipped to 1 or 2 countries, and put on display in a pet store. Once purchased, we expect them to feast on white mice, which will undoubtedly get hungry and aggressive before the snake does! These shy animals are naturally anorectic 6 months of the year, so why are we surprised when they fail to eat in such an UNNATURAL setting?

There are a few environmental basics that work well for many of the more common Boas and Pythons. These basics should be modified, however, according to an awareness of the NATURAL HABITAT of the specific species - a *climbing* or *burrowing* snake: a *desert savannah* or *rainforest dweller*; a snake that hibernates (hibernation can be essential for the formation of gametes-sex cells- for breeding) in November like the Ball Python or in June/ July like some Boas. The more "exotic" the species, the more important the details for success in captivity. Southeast swamp snakes will die in tap water. They need "acidic" water - natural iced tea will work. Xenodontine snakes (King & Rat snakes) eat amphibian and fish diets which are deficient in vitamins but rich in parasites, and must be supplemented with vitamins B & E, and be dewormed regularly.

Probably the best way to outline the basics of proper care is to list the DO'S and DON'Ts that work for most species...

DO research the natural lifestyle of your snake **BEFORE** you bring it home.

DO use indoor/outdoor carpet, artificial turf, newspaper or brown paper for the substrate to avoid skin disease.

DO use a ventral (under-NOT-in) heat source at one end of the environment

DO NOT use hot rocks for snakes. They are completely unsatisfactory for the body mass of an animal over 10-12 inches long and can cause serious burns.

DO use of sphagnum moss (NOT woodchips) to retain humidity, provide a burrowing substrate or create a gradient of temperature of humidity in the tank.

DO use an external HEAT LAMP, not just a light bulb for those snakes that need it dry and hot. Remember that desert snakes also require good ventilation.

DO NOT feed live food. Live food animals can injure your snake and can harbor parasites.

DO feed frozen food animals to help destroy the parasites they contain; thaw to feed.

DO bake substrate materials at 300 °F for 15 minutes to sterilize it before use.

DO use full spectrum lights (Vita-Lite) for a diurnal species. Nocturnal snakes do not require UV supplementation.

DO scent new foods (white mice) with the preferred food until the snake makes the switch and eat frozen, but thawed to room temperature, mice readily.

DO NOT handle new animals at all until they are eating on their own, except to treat specific problems as directed by your vet.

DO provide a "hide box" for snakes that prefer to hide naturally.

DO use only well cleaned, non-resinous, and well anchored branches for climbing. Large grapevines work well.

Optimum temperature and humidity varies by species, but most snakes will tolerate 75-80F (tropical species may need 90-95 F) and 60-70% relative humidity (desert species may need as low as 10% while tropical species may need 90%).

An accurate thermometer and hygrometer is a MUST in each tank.

Visiting your veterinarian specializing in reptile care as soon as you get your new pet is the first step in helping to a long and healthy life for your new pet.