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## CARING FOR YOUR SNAKE

Snakes can make great pets when properly cared for. There are many different species, each having its own personality. They vary in size from 2-3 feet long to 15+ feet long. It is important to research your specific species to know what the exact requirements are for his/her habitat.

### Brief history:

There are over 2500 species of snakes in the world. Specific classification of each species is constantly being changed and debated and therefore will not be discussed in this handout. Snakes can be generally divided into 2 groups, venomous and non-venomous. We do not treat venomous snakes and so they will not be discussed. The most commonly kept pet snakes are grouped as either pythons or boas. Snakes come in a wide variety of color patterns that have been derived through selective breeding for the pet trade. Snakes do not have limbs or eyelids. Some basic information is listed below about the more commonly seen pet snakes.

Species	Example	General information
Boas		Origin: World wide Lifespan: 30+ years depending on species Adult size: 6-12 feet depending on species Temperament: usually evenly tempered and make good pets.
Pythons		Origin: World wide Lifespan: 40+ years depending on species Adult size: 6-20+ feet depending on species Temperament: Tend to be more unpredictable and more dangerous, with the exception of the more docile Ball and Burmese pythons. Reticulated pythons and Anacondas tend to be very aggressive and don't make good pets.
Milk Snake		Origin: North America Lifespan: 20-40+ years depending on species Adult size: 2-4 feet Temperament: Easily startled and faster moving but can be tamed with frequent handling.
Corn Snake		Origin: North America Lifespan: 30+ years Adult size: 3-6 feet Temperament: Easily startled and faster moving but can be tamed with frequent handling.

## **Housing:**

The housing requirements for snakes should mimic their natural environment as closely as possible. The following are some basic requirements for all snakes.

- Heating
  - o The cage should have solid walls and a mostly solid top to trap heat.
  - o Good heat sources include the following.
    - Reptile heat pad placed under the cage
    - Heat lamps that are at least 18 inches away from the snake to prevent burns.
      - Lightless heat lamps are best at night.
  - o Avoid hot rocks as direct contact with your snake can cause burns.
  - o Cage temperature should be monitored with several mercury or dial type thermometers. Avoid color strip thermometers.
  - o Ideal temperatures are as follows.
    - North American snakes: 70-80 F
    - Semi-tropical snakes: 75-85 F
    - Tropical snakes: 80-90 F
- Substrate (cage floor covering)
  - o Artificial turf is ideal as it can be cleaned and reused.
  - o Sand, small gravel, corn cob, walnut shells etc can be used for burrowing snakes but can cause intestinal obstruction if eaten and is harder to clean.
  - o Branches can be provided for climbing snakes, avoid branches with splinters.
- Humidity
  - o Required for snakes to shed
  - o Should be at 80% for tropical and semi-tropical snakes
  - o A small water bowl will provide humidity provided the cage walls are mostly solid.
    - Do not allow snake to soak excessively in water as this can cause sores and contaminate the water for drinking.
- Lighting – varies among species
  - o Boas and Pythons usually don't require UV light, however a snake that isn't eating may improve with UV exposure.
  - o Small species (King and Corn snakes)
    - Should be provided for 12-14 hours daily using both white light and full spectrum UV light.
    - The UV light source should be within 18 inches of the snake and should be changed every 6-8 months.

## **Feeding:**

- Snakes are obligate carnivores (they must eat meat).
  - o Small snakes may eat insects, tadpoles or pinkie mice.
    - Usually eat every 7-10 days
    - Do not feed only pinkie mice or insects for long periods as they are not balanced.
  - o Large snakes may eat adult rodents.
    - Do not fast rodents prior to feeding to snakes. The plant material in their stomach and intestines is an important source of vitamins for the snake.
    - It is recommended to feed pre-killed thawed frozen rodents or fresh killed rodents to prevent the rodent from injuring the snake.
    - Usually eat every 2-2 ½ weeks
  - o Giant snakes may eat rabbits
    - Usually eat every month
- Always wash your hands prior to feeding your snake to prevent you from being bitten.
- Some snakes require being fed in separate cages to decrease your risk of being bitten when entering their normal enclosure.