



## Pet Hospital of Peñasquitos

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### **BABY SNAKE CARE**

Many species of snakes are now produced in captivity. The advantages of captive born snakes compared to wild caught snakes are legion. Let's look at these advantages, how to care for hatchlings and make sure they eat.

Captive born snakes are much less aggressive than their wild caught counterparts. They also are much better adjusted to captivity and tend to be easier to feed. Usually they are in good body condition and health because they have avoided the rigors of importation and/or adjustment to captivity. They also tend to have fewer problems with parasites. Overall, captive born reptiles are a much better choice than wild caught reptiles.

Snakes were among the first reptiles to be successfully commercially produced, first colubrids then boids. The endless variety of color patterns, phases and albinos has led to enduring demand. Many colubrids are easily raised and bred and make excellent choices for the novice reptile keeper. Obviously, with so many different species, recommendations on care are generalities and exceptions should be expected.

For neonatal snakes cage temperature should stay between 75 to 85°F for temperate species and 75 to 90°F for tropical species. To avoid burns keep heat sources outside the cage. Heat tape or heating pads under one part of the cage often keep the cage warm if the ambient temperature is not too cool. A space heater is an excellent way to warm up a room or closet if more than a few snakes are kept. Hot rocks can develop surface areas with temperatures hot enough to burn snakes and aren't recommended. An overhead 60 to 100 watt reflector lights can boost temperatures during the day if needed but should be turned off at night. Dark blue lights can be used at night for heat.

A variety of glass aquariums with sliding screen tops and plastic or fiberglass cages are now widely available. Smaller cages are ideal for hatchlings because they have less difficulty finding food. Small plastic shoe or sweater boxes make an economical, stackable and easy to clean cage. Ventilation holes or screens can be placed on the sides

to keep the cage from getting too humid. Shoe and sweater boxes are useful for large numbers of snakes, especially in sliding rack systems. For smaller collections, however they are aesthetically uninspiring because one can't appreciate the animal in the cage without opening it.

Line the bottom of the cage with newspaper, aspen or pine shavings or gravel and sand. Newspaper is easy to notice when soiled or wet, cheap, easy to clean and provides refuge for inquisitive hatchlings. Pine shavings or sand can get caught in the mouth of hatchlings. Change to another substrate if this becomes a problem. Clean the cage once or twice a week or whenever it is dirty.

A clean water bowl should be present at all times. A small hide box is also a necessity. Commercial plastic hide boxes are easy to clean. Inverted clay saucers with a hole chipped in one side can also be used for hide boxes. If possible, provide branches, bark, rocks or other cage furniture.

The most common problem of hatchlings is refusing to eat. Be aware that many young snakes have enough yoke stored to last them several weeks. Resist the temptation to force feed them during the first several weeks until all efforts to get them to feed on their own have been exhausted. Don't handle hatchlings refusing to eat and make sure they are set up as discussed.

Several tricks work well in getting neonates to feed. The most successful is called "braining." A baby mouse (pinky) is killed and its skull softened so that a small amount of brain can be extruded onto the pinkie's snout or forced out through the nostrils. The "brained" pinkie is then slowly offered to the baby snake. Once the snake starts tongue flicking and picks up the brain scent, it seems to reflexly eat the pinkie. It sounds horrible but works on many different species. Even individuals that have steadfastly refused pinkies will immediately eat the first "brained" pinkie offered to them.

If "braining" fails other options exist. More aggressive species can sometimes be induced to strike and coil around a baby mouse. If one then slowly leaves the room so as not to disturb the snake they will often eat if undisturbed for several hours. Sometimes this works after 2 or 3 attempts. A "brained" pinkie sometimes will be eaten in this manner. For very small snakes, be sure to use one to two day old pinkies. For small arboreal species that aggressively strike then drop pinkies, try very small pinkies cut in half.

Lizard eating species such as some milk snakes and king snakes will often take pinkies scented with lizards. To do this, kill a pinkie and wash it in warm dilute dishwashing liquid and dry it off. Then take some skin or limbs from a dead lizard, grind up some lizard until mushy and rub this on all over the washed pinkie (particularly the head). One can also gently rub a live lizard over a pinkie and allow it defecate on the pinkie. Leave the scented pinkie with the snake overnight. If the snake doesn't go for a scented pinkie but will eat, lizards try tying a pinkie to the lizard. On subsequent feedings, offer less and less lizard until only a little lizard is needed to stimulate feeding. Use just enough cotton thread to attach the two and trim any loose ends.

Some species can be enticed with a rodent nest. Take some nest material, feces and baby mice and set it up in alternative hide box overnight. Many snakes find discovering a rodent nest a powerful appetite stimulant.

If all these do not work try different prey items and sizes or try feeding at different times of day and night. A combination of methods sometimes works. Talk with other snake breeders. If you are concerned about a medical basis for not eating contact your veterinarian. Force-feeding should be a last resort and can kill small snakes so be careful doing it. Most captive born snakes feed without any problems and continue to feed so hopefully you won't have any problems. There is a real joy to raising hatchlings from birth so consider buying a captive born baby instead of a wild caught adult. You won't regret it!