

THE SNAKE PIT



HATCHLING CARE GUIDE

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HOUSING

You're new little hatchy should be kept in a small plastic tub for the first 12 months (35cm x 24cm 7ltr Sistema Klip-It with the blue clips are the best). If you place them in anything too large they could potentially become scared and overwhelmed and may stop eating. A nice simple set up will be best until your snake becomes older and more settled. A small soldering iron can be used to make air holes around the sides and in the lid of the container. Inside the tub, paper towel as a substrate is best, and can be changed easily; cat litter, sand, dirt or bark should be avoided as this can breed bacteria and can be accidentally ingested when they eat. A small ceramic or glass water bowl at the cool end and little dark hide at the warm end is all that is needed in the tub. You can buy professional black hides from eBay, a small cave hide from your local pet store or recycle a small cardboard box. As long as the snake has a nice tight fit inside the hide, it will feel secure and safe.



Once your hatchy reaches a year old, it is called a 'yearling' and can be moved into a larger tub of around 30ltrs (Starmaid brand containers from Big W are ideal). You will also need to upgrade the size of the water bowl and hide and can add an artificial plant or wooden log to provide hiding/climbing places for your snake. Once your snake is about 2 years old it can be moved into 3-4ft tank/enclosure.

HEATING

All snakes are ectotherms, which means they are cold blooded and cannot heat or cool themselves. For the first 12 months you will need to provide 24/7 heating underneath one end of the container. If you have only 1-2 hatchys then a small heat mat insulated by a layer of polystyrene foam can be placed underneath each tub. If you have 3 or more small snakes it would be more efficient to use a heat cord running underneath all the tubs. Heating sources should never be placed directly inside a hatchling container due to the possibility of burning the snake. The heat source should cover approximately 1/3 of the underside of the tub with an ideal temperature of 32-34°C at the warm end and 25-28°C at the cooler end. This is so the snake can move between the warmer and cooler areas in order to regulate its own body temperature. It is important that your heat source is controlled by a thermostat to avoid overheating and you can buy a great little infra-red thermometer gun so you can check the temperature easily at any time.

For yearlings, the heat cord is still the best method of heating and can be put onto a timer so that heating is turned off throughout the night hours. Heat/light globes on a thermostat and timer are best suited for when your snake moves into a 3-4ft enclosure.

FEEDING

Feeding your hatchling is the fun part! Your new baby will be feeding prior to your purchase; however, it may not commence feeding again straight away. Do not worry, this is a common issue with all snake owners and can be overcome with patience. It is very important not to attempt to handle or feed for at least 1-2 weeks so they have time to settle into their new home. Depending on the size of your hatchling, they will be eating a pinky/velvet/fuzzy rat 1-2 times per week. Generally, the size of the food should be slightly larger than the width of the snake's stomach/body and should be increased as the hatchling grows.

It is recommended that you purchase packs of frozen rats and thaw each feed individually in warm water until it is completely defrosted and warm to touch. Do not ever feed a live rat/mouse as it has the potential to bite or scratch your snake in defence and can cause serious harm. Live feeding is also illegal and inhumane. It is a good idea to use feeding tongs to hold the food item as once your hatchling senses the prey, they can easily mistake your hand for food. Using the tongs, hold the rat by the tail just in front of the snake's mouth so he/she notices it and catches the scent. If they don't strike immediately, jiggle the rat to imitate natural movement. Once your hatchling strikes, they will coil around the rat and slowly begin to eat it from the head end first. If after a few minutes the snake hasn't taken the rat, it may be a little shy. You can carefully place the rat in the tub and leave it overnight; a shy snake may prefer to eat it in peace when there are fewer disturbances around. If by the morning the rat has not been eaten, please throw it away, do not allow the snake to eat it and do not re-freeze it. Once it does eat, try not to handle your hatchling for about 2 days afterwards as their body is focusing on digesting the food and there is a chance it will regurgitate it if stressed out.

As a general guideline, once your hatchling becomes a yearling, it should move onto hopper or weaner size rats, moving up to small and large adult rats once it reaches 2-3 years old.

HANDLING

Baby snakes are naturally defensive as they are small and vulnerable. To them, we can appear as a large scary predator and striking/biting is their only way of protecting themselves. With regular but not excessive handling, your hatchling will become tamer as he/she grows and learns to trust you are not going to eat it. As a general guideline, regular handling sessions of 5 mins at a time, several times a day can help your snake become accustomed to handling. Please be aware that each snake is different, so look for signs of them getting agitated or going off food to indicate you may be over stressing him/her and may need to cut back on the handling. Although most snakes will become tamer with age, there will always be some that remain snappier than others. It is a good idea to always use a snake hook to take your snake out of its tub, as even calm snakes can be cage defensive. Don't be put off if you do get bitten, all snake owners experience it! The teeth of a hatchling are quite small and will only feel like a little pinprick if you do get bitten.

SHEDDING

As your snake grows it will shed its skin on a regular basis; usually every 1-2 months when they are young and less frequently as they get older. Your snake can be "in shed" for anywhere from a couple of days to 1-2 weeks, this is normal. Signs to look for that indicate they are "in shed" are – blue/cloudy eyes, dull skin, soaking in the water bowl, crankiness, refusing food or hiding away in their hide. Cloudy eyes are the best indicator and will usually clear up for a day or so just before they actually shed. If your baby seems to be staying in shed for a while, increase the humidity of the tub as this helps the skin come off in one piece (see the Troubleshooting section for ways to do this). Please remember that when they are in shed, their vision is impaired and they may be a little uneasy and cranky. It is a good idea to postpone feeding until after shedding as when the shed is peeling off down the length of their body it can become stuck on the lump of the rat inside their stomach. It is highly recommended that you keep records of the date they shed, so when you are feeding and they refuse, you can see that they might be coming up to shed. Once you find a shed skin, always check it over to make sure the complete tail and eye cap scales have come off. If there is any skin still stuck on your hatchling, see the Troubleshooting section for how to remove it.

CLEANING & HYGEINE

Keeping your hatchling's home hygienic and clean is extremely important otherwise it can lead to health issues. Luckily snakes are very easy to look after; ensure their water is changed regularly to keep it fresh and any poo/faeces is cleaned up straight away. Snakes usually defecate 3-4 days after eating (white poo is urates/urine and brown is faeces). Replace with fresh paper towel after wiping out the container and hide with a spray bottle containing a dilution of F10 (a vet strength disinfectant that kills bacteria and viruses). To prevent the spread of germs/disease use hand sanitiser before and after handling/cleaning and avoid wearing strong perfumes or chemicals on your body. If your snake has somehow managed to cover itself in poo, let it soak in a nice warm bath for 10 mins and gently wipe over with paper towel to clean the skin.



The same cleaning regime applies to yearling snakes, however larger tubs/enclosures are better suited for using newspaper for the substrate rather than paper towel.

HEALTH ISSUES

Mites

Mites are small parasites that feed off snake blood. The best way to determine if your snake has mites is to look in the water bowl and in their enclosure. Mites are small and black and can sometimes be seen crawling in the tub, in the water bowl, on the snake's skin or wedged up under the scales. To treat mites, first soak your baby in a shallow container with warm water and a small amount of dishwashing liquid for 30mins. The detergent prevents air bubbles from forming along their skin, thus drowning the mites. In the tub spray a mite spray such as Callington's Reptile Enclosure Insecticide, close the lid and leave for 15 mins, do not rinse. Place the snake back in the tub; add the water bowl the next day to avoid contamination of the water. Be aware that mites can crawl between tubs so treat all your snakes and repeat the process in 1 week.

Respiratory Infection (RI)

RI is the snake version of a cold or flu. Signs to look out for include frothing or bubbles from the mouth, gurgling noises when breathing, or sitting with their mouth open. To help overcome the infection try increasing the temperature of the enclosure, if this does not help, your snake may need treatment by a vet.

Sunshine Virus (SV)

SV is a recent disease in the snake industry but has the potential to wipe out your entire collection. Symptoms to look out for include distortion and twisting of the body, arching the neck at unusual angles, problems keeping balance, nasal discharge, weight loss, mouth gaping and skin problems. It is believed to be spread by direct contact, body fluids, faecal matter and airborne particles. When adding new snakes to your collection, please maintain strict quarantine practices by keeping them in separate areas for 12-18 months. Snakes can carry the disease but show no symptoms. If you suspect your snake has SV, they will need to see a vet.

TROUBLE SHOOTING

ISSUE	POSSIBLE CAUSE	SOLUTION
Refusing to eat	Too much stress/ handling	Reduce the amount of handling and make sure the enclosure is not situated near noisy or high movement areas in your home.
	Temperature too low	If they are too cool, they cannot digest their food properly and will avoid eating. Check temperature and raise if needed.
	Feeling vulnerable	If their enclosure is too large or they do not have a hide, younger snakes can feel vulnerable. Move them into a smaller tub and make sure they have a nice cosy hide so they feel safe.
	Going into shed	When a snake is "in shed", they can become cranky and will prefer not to eat or be handled. Wait until after snake has shed to attempt feeding again.
	Fussy	Some snakes can develop fussy eating habits, you can try rubbing the scent of a mouse or quail onto the rat, try leaving the food item in the tub overnight or feeding them in complete darkness.
	Mites	Mites can irritate a snake enough to put them off food. Treat snake and tub (see Health Issues section).
	Illness	If all other possible problems have been ruled out, your snake may be sick and you should visit a vet.
Soaking in the water bowl	Going into shed	This is the most common reason they will soak in water, after their shed is complete they should stop soaking.
	Mites	Snakes soak in water to drown mites and to alleviate the irritation on their skin. Treat snake and tub (see Health Issues section).
	Temperature too high	If the tub is too warm they may seek out the water in order to help cool them down. Check temperature in the tub and lower if needed.
Regurgitating food	Temperature too low	If they are too cool, they cannot digest their food properly and may regurgitate it. Check temperature in the tub and raise if needed. Attempt to feed again in a couple of days.
	Food item too large	If a rat/mouse is too large and they cannot pass it through their digestive system, they may regurgitate it. Attempt to feed again in a couple of days with a smaller food item.
	Handling too soon after feeding	Leave your snake for a couple days after feeding to ensure they have digested the food properly.
Unshed skin stuck to snake	Humidity too low	Increase the humidity by misting the warm end of the tub with a water sprayer several times a day or using a larger water bowl.
	Temperature too warm and dry	Soak your snake in a shallow container of warm water for around 30 mins. Use a towel to help remove the unshed skin, but make sure to not rub too harshly as this can damage their scales.
	Nothing rough enough in the tub to rub up against	Place a log/branch or rock with a rough surface (not sharp) in their enclosure so that they can rub up against it to assist in dragging the skin off their body.
Snappy	Hungry	Increase the size of their food or feed them more frequently.
	Shedding	Leave them alone til after they have finished shedding.
	Stressed	Reduce the amount of handling and make sure the enclosure is not situated near noisy or high movement areas in your home.
	Illness	If all other possible problems have been ruled out, your snake may be sick and you should visit a vet.