

# Feeding Snakes

## All snakes are strict carnivores

The preferred prey item varies with the species but relatively large snakes consume appropriately sized rodents, rabbits, fish, birds, lizards, turtles, and even other snakes. Smaller snakes can eat insects, slugs and other mollusks, as well as worms.

## Most captive species can be fed small rodents

Popular snakes, including boas, pythons, rat snakes, corn snakes, bull snakes, and pine snakes, eat mice and rats of appropriate size. Recently imported adult ball pythons (*Python regius*) sometimes prefer gerbils. Larger snakes can also be fed rabbits or chickens.

Rodents can be purchased frozen from commercial suppliers and thawed prior to feeding. Although most captive snakes eat warm-blooded prey, some snakes like the kingsnake (*Lampropeltis* spp.), indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), hognose snake, and garter snake (*Thamnophis* spp.), feed on cold-blooded prey items like amphibians, fish, crayfish, and even other reptiles. Most of these species can be transitioned to a rodent diet by first disguising the rodent scent with a more familiar prey item. For instance rub a fish onto a pre-killed mouse.

Some snakes eat a variety of insects including the garter snake, green snake (*Opheodrys* spp.), worm snake (*Carphophis amoenus*), DeKay's brown snake (*Storeria dekayi*), and the ring-necked snake (*Diadophis punctatus*). As in other reptiles, insect prey should first be fed a calcium-fortified diet.

## When should my snake be fed?

Many snakes are active at twilight, and should be offered prey during the late afternoon or evening. Some species, like the ball python are nocturnal and may be uncomfortable feeding during the day.

## Should I feed fresh or frozen prey?

Feeding pre-killed food is preferable. If the snake does not eat immediately, live prey can inflict serious bites and scratches. Live prey can also transmit intestinal parasites.

Prey items can be freshly killed or purchased fresh-frozen and completely thawed. Warm the rodent in "hand hot" water to body temperature.

- Feed thawed prey items immediately.
- Do not microwave or thaw prey with heat or hot water, as this can alter nutritional value and accelerate bacterial growth causing the food to rapidly spoil.
- Never re-freeze food.
- Do not keep prey frozen for more than 4-6 months. After this time, nutritional value begins to decrease.

Place the prey item in the cage using tongs.

## How often should I feed my snake?

General guidelines:

- A baby snake can be fed every other day.
- Feed small adult snakes (like corn snakes) once every 7 days. Active species like the adult garter snake may need more frequent meals.
- Feed larger snakes, like boas and pythons, once every 10-14 days
- In many instances, breeding females also require more frequent meals.

Most captive snakes are overfed. Adjust the frequency of feeding based on your snake's body condition. Your veterinarian can show you how to regularly assess your snake's body condition

## **What size prey should be fed?**

For easier digestion and better absorption of nutrients, it is generally preferable to feed smaller prey more frequently instead of overly large prey items less frequently. For instance an adult corn snake should be fed an adult mouse weekly (or two small mice) instead of a small rat. Feed an adult boa constrictor one medium to large regularly and not a jumbo rat or small rabbit.

## **Adequate husbandry is necessary for normal digestion**

The snake's environment is crucial. If the husbandry set-up is not accurate, the snake will not feed properly.

- House your snake at a temperature range appropriate for the species.
- Minimize stress with hide boxes at both the cool and warm ends of the enclosure.
- The presence of basking lights and water baths can also influence appetite.

## **Supplementation is not necessary**

Vitamin/mineral supplementation is not indicated when feeding whole prey items.

## **What if my snake won't eat?**

Snakes born in captivity generally accept commonly available prey easily, however wild-caught adults can sometimes refuse prey. There are a number of techniques that can be tried to entice a snake to eat:

1. Offer a smaller prey item.
2. Offer a brown, gray, or black rodent instead of a white albino mouse or rat.
3. Offer an item that more closely resembles wild prey like a gerbil (in the ball python) or even a chick
4. Offer freshly killed prey.
5. Using forceps, dangle the prey item in front of the snake and try to encourage the snake to strike at its meal.
6. After feeding the snake, give the animal privacy or visual security by covering the glass with towels or newspaper for 24 hours. No peeking!
7. Try confining the snake with its prey in a small "feeding box" or cloth bag overnight.
8. Species that do not normally eat rodents can be transitioned by disguising rodent scent with that of a more familiar prey item. For instance, garter snakes can be fed young mice (also known as "pinkies" and "fuzzies") scented with fish.

An important physiologic reason for poor appetite can be a change in temperature and lighting as the fall/winter season approaches. If you do not plan to overwinter your snake, make sure the cage's temperature range is accurately maintained as environmental temperature falls.

Finally, realize that a poor appetite can be a sign of disease. If poor appetite persists or your snake is losing weight, consult with your reptile veterinarian.

## References

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