



Introduction to Snake Care

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This handout offers information on the care, feeding, and handling of large pet snakes. There are many similarities in the care of large snake species in this regard, but the following describes some of their differences.

Boa Constrictor

The boa constrictor, also called the "common boa", is a non-venomous boa species. They are found in Central and South America, and on some Caribbean islands. Size varies depending on the subspecies but large adults can reach 13-14 ft.

Boas grasp objects with their tails. Young boas may climb into trees and shrubs to forage but most adults become terrestrial (ground-dwelling) as they age and become heavier. In captivity, they can live 20-30 years.

It is best to obtain a boa constrictor from a professional breeder who has been breeding for years and does this work full-time. It is not recommended to a purchase-wild caught boa, as they generally have more health problems. Captive-bred boas also come in a wide variety of colors and patterns.

Python

There are many species of python but the ball python is the most common in the pet trade due to its smaller size and quiet temperament. The ball python is found in sub-Saharan Africa and it is a non-venomous constrictor. The name "ball python" refers to its tendency to curl into a ball when frightened. Females tend to be slightly larger than males (4-4.5 ft), and some pythons have lived up to 40 years in captivity. They are ground dwellers that prefer burrows and other underground hiding places.



Boa & Python Habitat

All-glass terrariums, plastic cages, rack systems, or homemade cages are housing options for your snake. In general, if your adult snake is 10 ft long, the enclosure should be 5'x5' or 6'x4'. A 12 ft long adult snake should live in an 8'x4' enclosure. Boas tend to climb, so the enclosure should have a vertical height of 4'-5'. There are several options for **substrate** material to line the bottom of the enclosure, all of which have pros and cons:

1. Newspaper is inexpensive and easily accessible, but not visibly appealing.
2. Aspen shavings are appealing and readily available, but dusty and difficult to clean.
3. Cypress mulch is readily available and helps to increase relative humidity, but it requires more frequent cleaning and maintenance.
4. Carefresh (recycled paper) bedding is readily available, appealing, and mold-resistant, but expensive and harder to clean.
5. Dri-dek rubber mats are easy to clean and resistant to mold and bacteria, but expensive.

Snakes need an external **heat source**. In nature, they bask in the sun for warmth. In captivity, we need to provide them with a source of warmth. We recommend that you have a temperature gradient with a cool area of the enclosure set to 70-75 degrees F and a warmer basking area set at 82-92 degrees F. This allows your snake to thermoregulate by changing location. Be sure to have thermometers inside the enclosure at ground level to monitor the temperature. Use the following heat sources inside of the enclosure:

1. Heat lamps that have either incandescent (white light) bulbs or infrared (red light) bulbs. These are mounted on the top of the enclosure and radiate downward.
2. Heating pads that have an adhesive back and adhere to the bottom of the enclosure. These pads radiate heat upwards.

Boas and pythons do not have specific lighting requirements other than the basic night/day cycle which can be provided with a basic fluorescent light set on a timer.

The relative **humidity** in the environment helps to keep your snake hydrated and shed its skin. Snakes need to shed their skin throughout their lives, and inadequate humidity in the environment will result in incomplete shedding. For the boa, ideal humidity should be about 60%. For the ball python, the ideal humidity is 50-60%. Additional moisture can be provided to help your snake shed by misting the enclosure's substrate with water twice daily. You can also provide your snake with a container of water deep enough that it can soak in. A well-hydrated snake will shed their skin in 1-2 long pieces. If the environment is too dry, they will shed in pieces which may be retained on their body and cause harmful build-up. If this occurs, your snake will need assistance from your veterinarian.

Hiding areas inside the enclosure will provide your snake with a space to retreat and feel safe, which will reduce stress. Place a hiding area in both the cool and warm sides of the enclosure. The hiding area should be small enough that the snake will feel the sides of the container (snug), and it should be completely closed except for the entrance hole. You can use a cardboard box, plastic storage container, or half-log.

Feeding

These snakes can eat mice, rats, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, and rabbits. Young snakes should be offered one appropriate-sized food item every 5-7 days. Adult snakes should be offered a meal every 7-10 days. The size of the feeder animal should be no wider than the largest part of your snake's body. Juvenile snakes will often eat "pinkies" which are baby rats and mice. These come frozen and you thaw them before feeding. Just like other pets, snakes can become overweight if fed too frequently or when they are fed meals that are too large.

It is best to offer your snake frozen rodents that have been thawed and warmed. The freezing process kills any harmful parasites that the rodent may have. Frozen rodents are also convenient to store until needed. Live prey rodents can bite your snake and cause serious injury, so they are not recommended. If your snake will not eat thawed rodents, then freshly killed rodents may be a compromise.

We recommend that you have a separate feeding enclosure for your snake that is separate from its normal habitat. This will prevent your snake from striking in its normal environment. A large Tupperware container or small tote usually works well.

Your snake should have access to a bowl of fresh drinking water at all times. Clean the bowl at least once weekly.

Handling

After you bring your new snake home, they will feel stressed and need time to adjust to their new environment. It's best to leave your snake alone for the first 5-7 days in a proper enclosure, and then offer a meal. Once they eat, give them at least 24-48 hours to digest the meal. You should not handle your snake during this period where they are digesting a meal. You should also avoid handling your snake when they are shedding their skin.

Signs of Illness

The more you observe your snake, the better you will understand what is normal for your snake and when something isn't right. If your snake refuses food for more than 1 week, regurgitates a meal, blows bubbles through their nose, eyes, or mouth; has difficulty breathing or skin lesions

seek medical attention.

Preventive Care

Monitoring the temperature and cleanliness of your snake's enclosure will help them maintain good health. To optimize your snake's health, make the following part of your daily routine:

1. Check the enclosure temperature at least once daily or more often when the enclosure is first set up and during seasonal changes.
2. Check for cleanliness on a weekly basis and remove feces and shed skin. Clean the enclosure completely once a month.
3. Keep the water bowl in the center of the enclosure, as your snake will likely defecate at the periphery.
4. Regularly check that the enclosure is secure with latches, knobs, etc.
5. Keep notes about your snake's feeding (i.e. size of the meal, and if the meal was eaten/refused).

We recommend a yearly wellness exam for your snake to ensure optimum health at all life stages.