Snake Feeding Tips

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Feeding your snake is not going to be as simple as feeding a cat or a dog. It involves much more than simply placing a bowl of food in front of him. Below are some helpful tips about how to feed your snake, including when and where to feed him, whether it is better to feed live or pre-killed prey, and more.

Promoting Proper Eating Habits

The first things you need to do to ensure that your snake eats properly is set up and maintain the habitat correctly. Each species will have its own unique habitat requirements pertaining to temperature, lighting, humidity, layout, accessories, size of the habitat, and more. A snake that is in an environment that is too cold, too dark, too small, or otherwise improperly maintained is going to have a decrease in appetite and may actually refuse food completely. Always set up and stabilize the habitat before bringing your snake home, and monitor it with thermometers, hygrometers, timers, and other helpful equipment.

Using a Separate Feeding Enclosure

A separate feeding enclosure may not be necessary in certain cases, but it can definitely be helpful. Using a different habitat for feeding times can help to keep the main enclosure cleaner and more sanitary. A separate feeding enclosure will be necessary if you are housing more than one snake in a habitat (to prevent them from viewing other snakes as prey) and if you use a substrate that can be ingested.

When and How Often to Feed

When you feed your snake depends on what times he is most active. For example, Ball Pythons will only eat at dusk or during the evening. Snakes that are nocturnal should be fed at night. Other snakes will only eat during the day or at twilight hours. Research your snake's behavioral patterns or speak with your veterinarian to determine what time of the day is best to feed your snake.

How often you feed your snake depends on what species he is as well as how old he is. Baby snakes actually won't start looking for food until they are two to four weeks old. Young snakes generally need to eat about twice a week, or every two to seven days depending on how quickly you want them to grow. As a snake gets older, he will not need to be fed as much, but the frequency will depend on the species and how large he is. Corn snakes only need to eat about every ten days, while adult king snakes should be fed once or twice a week.

Choosing the Size of the Food

The size of the prey you choose will depend on whether or not the snake can both swallow and digest it. A good rule of thumb to follow is that the prey should be no wider than the widest part of the snake's body. Choosing prey that is too large can result in regurgitation, injuries, seizures, partial paralysis, gut impactions, and death.

What Should I Feed My Snake?

What you feed your snake varies by species. Some snakes will live primarily on rodents and baby chicks. Other snakes need a

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diet that consists of feeder insects or small fish. Research the dietary needs of your snake before bringing him home to make sure that you can provide the diet he needs. If you are squeamish about feeding one animal to another, then a snake may not be the right pet for you!

Pre-killed vs. Live Prey

Many snake owners insist that their snakes need the thrill of hunting and catching live prey, such as mice, baby chicks, and rats. This isn't true. Mental and physical stimulation comes from the overall environment that you create for your snake, not from attempting to catch a live animal in a small space.

We recommend feeding pre-killed prey for a number of reasons. They include:

- Live prey can be too active for some young snakes.
- Attacks by live prey can permanently scar and disfigure your snake.
- If your snake is attacked by live prey, he can forever become frightened of it, and it can be very difficult to get that snake to feed himself from then on.
- Live prey can fight back during feeding, causing injuries that can include (but are not limited to) biting through your snake's mouth area, puncturing his eyes, and cutting through his tongue sheath.

Feeding pre-killed prey is safer for your snake, and it eliminates the possibility that the prey may bite and gnaw on your snake. What prey you're feeding your snake will determine how serious an attack could be. Mice and chicks are generally harmless, but rats can actually kill a snake. Crickets and mealworms will also nibble and bite on your snake if they do not have an alternate food source in the enclosure.

If you feel that you must feed live prey, we highly recommend that you provide a food source for the prey so it will not attempt to eat your snake, and watch it closely for any signs that it may be biting or gnawing on the snake. If this happens, remove it immediately and take your snake to the veterinarian. Remember, the dangers that a live prey animal present can be completely eliminated by feeding pre-killed prey instead!

Pre-killed prey can be purchased live and then killed by you, or you can purchase it already killed. You can freeze pre-killed prey for up to six months. Just be sure to thaw it completely and warm it to slightly above room temperature before feeding it to your snake.

Tips for Feeding Pre-killed Prey

Many snakes will take immediately to pre-killed prey (Please see our article Pre-Killed vs. Live Prey for Reptiles), but if your snake is picky, the following tips will be helpful:

- Rub the live prey that your snake prefers against the pre-killed prey before putting it in the enclosure.
- Dip the pre-killed prey in a dish of warm chicken broth.
- Use tongs or hemostats to dangle the prey and "walk" it around the cage to make it appear as if the prey is alive and entice the snake to strike at it.
- Make sure the prey is warmer than room temperature; it will smell more appetizing to your snake that way.
- Pith (pierce) the braincase of the prey with a pin or a nail to release more enticing odors.
- Feed your snake a different colored prey animal (e.g., if you're trying a white mouse, switch to a brown mouse instead).

Feeding snakes is not easy, but with a little time and effort and the right methods at your fingertips, you can keep your snake happy, healthy, and well-nourished.

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