# FAQs: Snakes

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

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- Can I keep more than one snake in a cage?
- How should I hold my snake?
- Why does my snake keep wrapping around me when I'm holding him?

## Why do snakes flick the air with their tongues?

When a snake flicks his tongue in and out of its mouth, he's's not tasting things, he's smelling them. They have a sensory organ called a "Jacobson's Organ" on the roof of their mouths, and they use their tongue to pull minute particles of air into their mouths. The Jacobson's Organ allows them to differentiate between prey, predator, and other smells.

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## Are snakes slimy?

Snakes are covered in scales, small and thin on the top of their bodies and thick and large on their bellies, that are very dry and smooth.

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## Do snakes dislocate their jaws when they eat?

No, the two halves of the lower jaw and the bones are attached to each other with elastic ligaments. They have a number of joints that allow them to open their mouths very wide and swallow their prey whole.

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## Are all snakes venomous?

Actually, only about 10% of all snakes are venomous, and only 20 of the 110 species native to the United States are venomous. It's a misconception that all snakes are dangerous. In fact, more people die each from bee stings than from snake bites.

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## Why do snakes shed their skin?

This is called ecydysis, and it's necessary for your snake to continue growing. Adult snakes will only shed once or twice a year, while juveniles can shed every one to two months, depending on how quickly they are growing. Unlike most lizards that shed in several small pieces, snakes shed their skin in one large piece.

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## What do snakes eat?

All snakes are carnivores, the only difference is what kind of meat they eat. Items that may be part of a snake's diet include prey animals, live crickets, other feeder insects, small fish, and other snakes. The exact diet will vary by species, but all snakes eat other animals.



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### Do I have to feed my snake live mice and other prey animals?

No, you don't, and we actually recommend that you don't feed live animals to your snake. Pre-killed or frozen prey is safer for your snake as well as more humane for the prey animal. To learn more about the benefits of feeding pre-killed prey, read Pre-killed vs. Live Prey.

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### How do I know what size prey to feed my snake?

The prey animal you feed your snake should be no wider than the widest part of your snake's body. Prey that is too large can result in injury, regurgitation, seizures, gut impactions, partial paralysis, and death. If you are unsure, speak to your veterinarian.

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### How big should my snake's habitat be?

Snakes vary widely in size, and so do the size requirements for their enclosures. However, they can be grouped into three main cage size groups. The first, which includes smaller snakes like Garter snakes and Grass snakes, will need a 10 to 20 gallon terrarium. The second group, including King, Rat, Milk, and Gopher snakes, will need at least a 30 to 55 gallon terrarium. The last group, which includes snakes such as Boa Constrictors and Pythons, will require custom built cages to accommodate their very large size. When choosing a terrarium for your snake, use the following to determine sufficient cage size.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Length** | 3/4 of total length of snake |
| **Depth** | 1/3 of total length of snake |
| **Height** | 3/4 of total length of snake (terrestrial species)<br>1 times total length of snake, but no more than 6 feet to 8 feet (arboreal species) |

Measurements should be based on adult size.

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### What should I put in the habitat?

Habitat accessories will vary widely by species, but some common accessories include a water bowl for drinking and soaking, hiding places to create a sense of security, and shelves and branches for climbing, basking, and resting. Rocks can also be added both as a place to bask and as something they can rub on to facilitate proper shedding.

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### What temperature should my snake's enclosure be?

Exact temperature will vary by species, but all snakes have a preferred optimum



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temperature range (POTR) that you must provide for the health of your snake. You will need to create a temperature gradient in the cage, both horizontally and vertically, for the purposes of thermoregulation (adjusting body temperature by moving between warm and cool areas). Research your specific snake to determine the upper and lower temperatures of his POTR, and always monitor temperature with thermometers.
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## What should I use to heat my snake's cage?

There are two heat sources that you will use in your snake's enclosure - a primary heat source and a secondary heat source. Primary heat sources control the ambient temperature of the habitat. During the day you can use a row of incandescent bulbs. At night, you can use heating pads, ceramic heat emitters, or nocturnal incandescent bulbs.

Secondary heat sources create warmer areas in the enclosure, and they should cover 25% to 30% of the enclosure's surface area. For this purpose, you can use basking lights and under tank heaters for heating a portion of the cage.
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## What is the proper humidity level for a snake?

Humidity levels vary widely depending on the species. Snakes from tropical regions will need high humidity, while snakes from arid regions will need low to medium humidity. For example, the Amazon Tree Boa, native to the rainforest, needs a humidity level of 80% to 90%, while the Milk Snake, native to most of North America, will need a humidity level of 40% to 60%. Research your species' humidity requirements and talk to your veterinarian to determine what humidity your snake should be kept at. Always monitor humidity with a hygrometer.
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## Do snakes require special lighting?

Whether or not snakes need special lighting has not been definitively proven yet. While they seem to require no special lighting, they could benefit from low amounts of UV light during the day. All snakes, even those species that are nocturnal, are exposed to some sunlight during the day, and it's important that you recreate their natural environment as closely as possible. We recommend the use of full spectrum fluorescent lights with a low UVB output, such as a 2.0 UVB light. Incandescent bulbs should also be used, both as a source of light and of heat.
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## Are snakes nocturnal or diurnal?

This depends on the species. Some, such as the Ball Python, are nocturnal, while others are diurnal. Regardless of whether they are diurnal or nocturnal, all snakes need a natural light cycle of approximately 12 hours of light followed by 12 hours of darkness.
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## Can I keep more than one snake in a cage?

This depends on the species you are keeping. Some snakes eat other snakes, and they will have to be housed individually. Some snakes can be housed with other snakes of the same species, but you will have to use a separate feeding enclosure to ensure that they don't view each other as food.
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## How should I hold my snake?



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If the snake is small, support him in your hand or around your arm, allowing him to move freely in your hand rather than grabbing him and holding him still. If you drape him across your shoulders, bow the middle part down your back so the snake is not directly against the back of your neck. If the snake is larger than 6 feet, you will need two people to properly support him.

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## Why does my snake keep wrapping around me when I'm holding him?

If your snake keeps trying to wrap himself tightly around your limbs or your body while you're holding him, you're doing something wrong. Snakes will attempt to grab onto you when they don't feel secure or safe.

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