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Keeping Snakes

Some of the easiest animals to care for in captivity are commonly-kept snakes. They only need a clean, dry cage, proper temperatures, food and clean water to thrive. Among the most popular pets are corns, kings, milks, bulls, boas and pythons. Most are hardy, long-lived, attractive, and hesitant to bite after a short time in captivity. The care for all is similar, and specific care sheets can be found for free on the Internet for most any species, so this is merely a short overview of “do’s and don’ts.” I’ll start with the “Don’ts,” because that is more important.

The Don’ts

1. **Don’t house snakes together!** There really is no exception to this rule. Many snakes will tolerate the company of others, but by no means assume that one will be “lonely” if kept alone. Snakes are not social animals and only interact with one another with aggression or to breed. Many people mistakenly assume that their snakes “like” each other because they stay in the same hide. They do this simply because that is the optimal place in the cage in terms of temperature, shelter, and sometimes humidity. There is no upside to housing snakes together. Downsides are many, the biggest being cannibalism.
2. **Don’t buy giants such as Burmese or Reticulated pythons!** Many people purchase these animals with the mindset that they will deal with the large size when it happens. If properly fed and maintained, in three years a Burmese can reach ten feet and forty plus pounds! These giants simply are not safe. Almost no one is capable of taking care of these creatures for the entirety of the snake’s lives. And a 17+ foot snake costs a fortune to feed! 4-5 rabbits per feeding adds up, and to put it bluntly –what comes out the other end can be the size of pony poop! And the obvious reason: being bitten by a snake that weighs more than you is not a pleasant experience. Many people buy these thinking, “When it gets too big, I’ll get rid of it.” Good luck. No zoos, breeders, nature centers, or private collectors want *another* big python. I’ve tried to help place a number of these: trust me on this- it’s almost impossible.
3. **Don’t leave live rodents with a snake unattended.** I have seen many chewed up and blinded snakes that got these injuries from a rat or even a mouse. Almost all snakes will take pre-killed, and most will take frozen/thawed. This is the ideal way to feed. If you’ve seen snakes kill and eat prey 20 times, you’ve seen it all. If you must feed live, don’t turn your back until the rodent is dead.

The Do’s

1. **DO get proper caging!** I can’t stress enough how good snakes are at escaping! Get a cage meant for housing snakes and keep lids or tops firmly closed.

2. **Keep your temperatures correct!** I'd wager that 90% of health issues that people encounter with reptiles come from incorrect temperatures. Keep a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. Heat tape or pads are ideal, snakes don't require lights like many other reptiles, but they do require proper heat. Too cool of an enclosure leads to loss of appetite and regurgitation. See care sheets for your species for specifics.
3. **Feed pre-killed or thawed rodents when possible.** When bitten, rodents bite back. Usually this does no damage; I've seen many snakes with missing eyes and scars, though. There is no reason to feed live to a snake that will accept dead, and almost all will. Feeding outside the cage in my experience makes no difference whatsoever -this phenomenon is a result of Internet info regurgitation.
4. **Leave your snake alone after feeding.** This is no time to handle it. It needs to find a warm spot to digest its meal. After 48 hours or so, it can be taken out if need be. If there is still a noticeable lump in the snake's body after 2 days, it needs more digestion time, and probably has eaten too large a prey item.

- Chip Bridges