



Portsmouth Reptile & Amphibian Society
P.O Box 16
Portsmouth
PO2 9BW



P.R.A.S Care sheet No 19

A guide to looking after your first hatchling snake

So you decided to buy a baby snake

Buying your first snake is a big decision. Before you take that first step, there are a few facts you must appreciate;

- A snake will live for **at least** 10 years if looked after properly.
- The most commonly kept snake grows to nearly five feet in length.
- They eat rodents of suitable size.
- They need to be kept warm at all times.
- A (very) basic set up can cost up to £30.

Still reading? Then I'll continue. Keeping a snake isn't all doom and gloom and hard work. Here's the other side of the coin:

- Once established a snake is very cheap to maintain. An adult Corn snake can cost as little as 20 PENCE A WEEK to feed!
- Snakes are very clean. They don't get fleas, shed hair everywhere, bring you 'little presents', or carry many of the diseases of the more familiar cats, dogs etc.
- A snake is a very low maintenance pet. An adult snake can be left alone for weeks as long as it has been recently fed and fresh water is provided.
- A snake takes up very little space. A fully-grown Corn snake can be kept in a two foot by two-foot vivarium.
- A fully decorated vivarium can make a striking centerpiece to a room
- The food is usually frozen and pre-packed from the pet shop.
- Apart from the above, other plus points are that snakes don't smell, and a tame one is a very gentle animal, as well as the endless fascination and enjoyment it brings to children and adults alike.

If you've got this far then you have probably decided to go ahead--well done, you won't regret it. The first and most important thing you need to do is read, consult with experts and then read some more. Find out as much as you can, **you can never know too much.**

Secondly, decide which snake you want. The most common beginners snake is the Corn snake. Not far behind is the Californian King snake, but the care and maintenance for both are almost the same. This care sheet deals mainly with the corn snake, as it is by far the most common snake in captivity in the World.

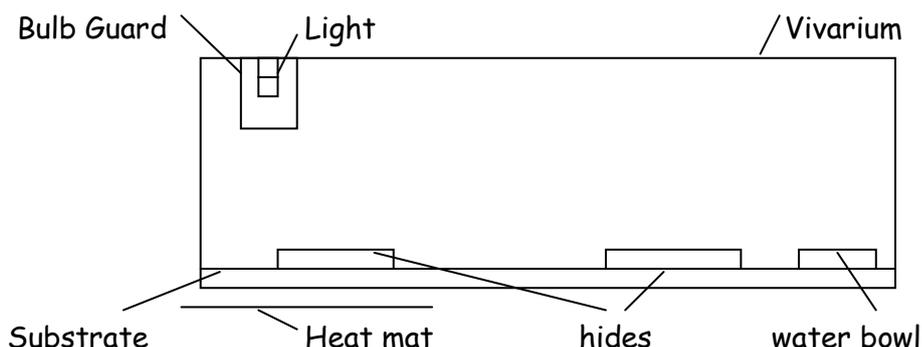
Housing:

Firstly set up your vivarium. This can be as basic or extravagant as you wish. The most basic set up consists of:

1. **An escape proof container** this must be well ventilated and easy to clean. A 'Pet Pal' as used for small furry animals is ideal, or a small glass fish tank WITH A VERY SECURE LID. Assuming you start with a hatchling snake, which will measure about 25cm (10") in length, you should provide a container in which the snake has enough room to stretch out.
2. **A method of keeping the snake warm.** This usually takes the form of a heat mat, which sits under the container and provides a gentle warmth which the snake can use to warm itself up on. It is VITAL that only a maximum of half the surface area of the container is heated, as the snake must be able to cool itself down as well as warm itself up. This heat mat must also be attached to a mat thermostat to prevent overheating.
3. **A substrate for the bottom of the container.** This can be as basic as newspaper, but the most common type is wood shavings (not sawdust). Other choices include corn cob, bark chippings, or kitchen roll. DO NOT USE CEDAR BARK- This is toxic to the snake.
4. **Somewhere for the snake to hide.** The snake needs somewhere where it can feel safe and secure. This can take the form of a toilet roll tube, a piece of natural cork bark, or even a small cardboard box. It needs to be big enough for the snake to curl up in but small enough for the snake to feel protected.
5. **A water bowl.** This should be big enough for the snake to immerse itself in, as they do like to soak themselves especially when shedding. It should also be easy to clean, and heavy enough to prevent getting tipped over.

There are other items, which are not essential but will enhance the set up. These include greenery, small branches on which the snake can climb, small pieces of stone etc. What you add is a purely personal decision, but snakes need variety and stimulation just like any other animal. Do not use sticky tape inside the vivarium! Snakes seem to find a way of getting stuck to it and it can be a big problem getting them unstuck.

Now you've got the bits, how do you set them up? The usual way is as follows:



Although the final design is up to you, it is important to have all the heating at one end of the tank in order to create a temperature gradient inside the tank. The addition of extra light is not compulsory, but the snake will bask if allowed. However, you must ensure the snake does not overheat. A thermostat is essential for any heat lamp to prevent the vivarium from overheating. If the temperature gets too high, your snake can be killed very quickly. Good min/ max digital thermometers are a good investment as well, as they show you what the temperatures have been at a point in the vivarium, and are quite cheap.

What to look for in a healthy snake:

Now you have got your set up, you need to get your baby snake. First and foremost, go to a reputable dealer or a reptile specialist. Many small pet shops may have the odd snake, but these should be avoided unless you are sure of the owner's integrity. It is always preferable to obtain captive bred snakes as these tend to do better in captivity and be parasite free. It is also infinitely preferable to buy a hatchling which is feeding on DEFROSTED food, not live, as this removes one of the main ethical problems of feeding live mice to your pet, and is also safer for your snake, and easier to keep in your freezer.

A healthy snake **MUST** be feeding regularly. Check with the supplier about feeding records, and if they are unable to provide these then walk away. A well-fed hatchling will be slightly round in shape. If the body is triangular with a prominent spine then, again, walk away.

The snake should be alert. The tongue must flicker regularly and the snake should be following any movement and show an interest in its surroundings. If the snake is lethargic and unresponsive then avoid it. There should be no lumps or bumps on the skin. These can be signs of mites or ticks. Mites show up as tiny black specks, which can often be seen crawling over the skin.

Unless the snake is shedding then the eyes and nostrils should be clear. If there is any discharge from the nose or mouth then this could be a sign of infection. Again the animal should be avoided.

Now you've got your snake and its home, how do you look after it? Keeping a snake is very easy. It has very basic requirements consisting of food and warmth and not much else. Here is a step by step guide to keeping a happy and healthy snake.

Make sure your snake stays warm:

A daytime temperature of 27-30°C (81-86°F) at the warm end of the tank is ideal, falling to around 20°C (68°F) at the cooler end. At night the temperature can be allowed to drop by 5° (10°F), but leaving the heat mat on. If the **ambient** temperature rises above 27°C (80°F) then all tank heating should be switched off, as the snake cannot lose heat very well. This shouldn't happen though, as your thermostats should prevent this. Temperature is very important as it affects the animal's willingness to feed. A cold snake does not feed well, and so the health of the snake suffers. The reverse is also true- If the snake is too warm then the food tends to be regurgitated which is not very pleasant.

If all this sounds a little complicated, don't worry. A captive-bred corn snake is a very

hardy creature and unless the temperature is a long way out for a substantial length of time then the snake tends to do ok. Basically, monitor the temperature and use your common sense.

Feeding your pet:

A hatchling snake will be feeding on newborn (pinkie) mice. These mice can be bought frozen and pre-packed from many pet shops and reptile specialists, and must be defrosted before feeding to your pet.

The easiest way to defrost is simply to remove the food from the freezer and leave to defrost naturally, but a quicker way is to immerse the food in some warm water. This will defrost the food in a few minutes. If the pinkie is still warm from the water then the snake will be more likely to accept the food than if the food is still cold.

There is no hard and fast rule about how often you should feed your baby snake, but a general regime is to feed one pinkie every 3 to 4 days. If the snake takes the first pinkie and seems to be looking for more then try offering another. If it is hungry then a baby snake can easily manage two pinkies. However a word of warning! Do not over feed, as the snake will have a habit of regurgitating the meal a little while later, which is not good for you or the snake.

You will soon work out the best method of feeding for your particular snake. Some prefer to eat in the evenings, some at night, some in the dark, and some will happily take the food out of your hands. Every snake is different and your care should be tailored to your own specific animal.

As your pet grows you can either offer it more and more pinkies at once, or a far better idea is to offer it larger prey. A pinkie does not have much calcium in it as its bones are not fully developed, and this lack of dietary calcium will effect the development of the snake. The next step is to offer " fuzzies". These are newly furred mice, and one fuzzy contains as much nourishment as two pinkies but costs about the same. Because they are bigger than pinkies they cannot be given to new hatchlings, as they will be unable to swallow them. When you offer your pet fuzzies is up to you. Generally when three pinkies fail to satisfy your pet, then as long as the fuzzy is less than one and a half times the width of your pet then it should be ok to try. You will soon be able to tell when your snake is hungry; as it tends to become active as if it is searching for food, and the relish with which it accepts the food offered will be an indication of its appetite.

Every so often, about every 3 to 4 weeks your snake will shed its skin. The start of the shedding cycle begins with a general overall darkening of the skin followed a few days later by clouding over of the eyes. At this point the snake is practically blind and not usually tolerant to handling. It tends to hide itself away until the shedding process is over. Usually it will refuse to feed and may become a little agitated. The best thing you can do is to leave it alone until the shedding process is over. During the shedding process a daily misting with water from a garden sprayer will raise the humidity and help the snake to shed. Soon after the snake has shed then you can offer it some food. This will usually be taken quite readily as the shedding process can take up to a week from start to finish (although the actual shedding of the skin is a relatively quick process.).

A snake is not born tame. In order for a snake to survive in the wild it must be born with a strong instinct to feed. In order to overcome its natural fear of anything bigger than itself the snake must be handled frequently and gently. The more you handle it the tamer it will become. So it is up to you to put in the effort in order to get the results, and a tame snake is a lovely gentle and relaxing animal. An untamed snake is to say the least a handful!

As long as your snake feeds regularly and is looked after properly then vitamin supplements are not essential. These supplements come in the form of a dry powder, which can be dusted on to the food. Like vitamins for humans, they are not essential as long as the diet is of a good quality and sufficient quantity. Saying that, the addition of extra vitamins, (e.g. Nutrobal) will not harm the snake.

A snake is totally deaf but very sensitive to vibrations. It is not advisable to place your snake next to any object, which will cause these vibrations, for example: washing machines, Hi-fi equipment, televisions etc. If the snake is constantly bombarded by vibrations then it will become stressed and its health will suffer.

Every now and then a snake will refuse to feed for no apparent reason. Do not be alarmed, as this is far from unusual. A snake may refuse food for many reasons, the wrong temperature, if the animal is shedding etc. Other reasons can be seasonal. During the winter months and during the mating season (early spring) the appetite of the male snakes may fall. However, if a snake refuses feeds for a number of weeks then veterinarian help must be sought.

As your snake grows and flourishes you can start to feed larger and larger prey until it reaches adulthood. Once here, it will eat an adult mouse no less than every 7-10 days. The rest of the care is the same as before.

If keeping a snake is so easy, then how come this care sheet is so long? I hear you cry. Well keeping any animal takes thought and common sense. However as your snake does not come from these Isles then you have to adapt the vivarium to the conditions which will suit your new friend. Once these conditions have been met then the rest is easy as long as you use a little common sense and a little effort.

This care sheet is not to be taken as a definitive work on the first few months of keeping your first baby snake. You should still read as much literature as you can.

If your new baby is a more unusual type, for example a boa or a python then this should be used as a very basic guide and more specialized information must be sought. However if you decide on a Corn (or most other Rat snakes) or a King snake then this should help you get the most out of your new pet.