

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: A friend recently gave me a python. He did not, however, explain how to take care of it. Can you tell me what to do?

Answer: I can get you started on the right program with your snake. Snakes like boas and pythons should be fed such animals as rats, mice and birds. The size of the animal depends on the size of the snake. If your python refuses to eat what you offer, try a smaller or larger animal.

The younger the snake, the more frequently it will eat. Adult snakes may feed only twice a month but may go as long as three months without eating. Do not be concerned as long as the snake is healthy and showing no weight loss. A change in the feces can indicate digestive problems.

Your python's cage should be large enough to hold boxes, rocks, logs, etc. where the snake can hide. It should also have a container of water large enough for the snake to submerge. Newspapers, pea gravel or Astroturf are ideal bedding. To avoid escape, the cage lid should latch.

For heat, suspend an ultra violet 60-70 watt bulb about a foot above the cage. In addition, place a heat lamp 3-4 feet above the cage and turn it on 1-2 hours a day so the snake can bask in the "sun". Temperature is crucial for digestion and normal activity.

Because reptiles have crude temperature regulating systems, they assume the temperature of their environment which should be 75-90 degrees.

Maintaining proper humidity levels also is important and can be done with a fine mist spray. The humidity should be 33-60 percent. If it falls lower, the snake can become dehydrated and have trouble shedding its skin. If it rises higher, bacteria may build up and cause "blister disease".

Finally, the cage should be disinfected at least once a month with a 10 percent bleach solution. (Do not use Lysol).

As you see, caring for a snake is not a simple matter. The challenge is to recreate the snake's natural habitat within a relatively small cage.

If you have questions about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, 201 S. Capitol Ave. Ste. # 405, Indianapolis, Indiana 46225.