

Your New Corn Snake - A Guide to it's Care

By Rachel Maier MRCVS
Parkvets Veterinary Hospital

Congratulations on the new addition to your family. This is an exciting time for everyone and we hope that you will have many happy years together. This handout covers some of the basic facts about keeping a corn snake. Please read it carefully; if you have any further questions please ask a member of staff.

Species Name

Elaphe guttata gutta. Recent literature may refer to it as *Pantherophis guttata guttata*. Another common name is Red Rat Snake.

Family Relationships

Colubridae (typical snakes): Ophidia (snakes): Reptilia (reptiles).

Place of Origin

Much of North America.

Housing

Corn snakes can be kept in fairly modest-sized cages. Even for an adult, a cage 2-3' long will be quite adequate. Allow some vertical space for modest climbing. A glass aquarium with a vivarium lid can be used, or a purpose-built reptile cage. It is absolutely vital that sliding doors or tops shut securely, as snakes are great at escaping through even the smallest gap. A cage lock is a good investment.

Corn snakes may be active during the day, evening or night, depending on various factors including weather. They need temperatures of 80-85 deg F at the basking end. The temperature range in the tank should be 75-85 deg F. This is best done with a heat source at one end of the tank so as to create a thermal gradient, which basically means that the tank is warmer at one end and cooler at the other, allowing the snake to choose its temperature.

An under tank heat mat (under about half the tank) can be left on at night to provide background. "Heat rocks" should be avoided. Use a thermometer at each end of the tank and also a hygrometer to measure humidity, which should be average (40-60% - at the higher end during shedding). A reptile thermostat will allow proper control of temperature, and having any lights on a timer will give regular day/night periods. UVB lighting is not needed.

The bottom of the cage can be covered with paper towels, or a substrate of reptile-friendly bark (avoid cedar or pine), orchid bark or astroturf. A flat rock will allow basking and also let the corn snake rub its old skin off when shedding (a process that occurs several times a year). A healthy snake should shed in one piece. Hides are essential to make the snake feel secure. At least one should be at the hot end and one at the cool end of the tank. These should be just large enough for your snake to curl up in. Plastic plants and branches will provide a place for climbing and resting.

Normally, 1 corn snake is kept per tank. More than one corn snake can be kept together, but attention should be paid that the animals are not fighting. Each animal should be fed separately to avoid fighting and accidents, including unintentional cannibalism. Once fed the snakes can be put back into the cage.

Cage location should not be near a draught or right next to a heat source such as a radiator. It should be away from bright lights late at night as these will disturb the snake. Once in a while, change the layout of the cage furniture to prevent your snake becoming bored.

Suggested Feeding Guidelines

Feeding corn snakes is simple. The mice can be purchased and kept in a freezer until needed. Putting them in a bag in a container of warm water for 1-2 hours will thoroughly thaw them. Do not attempt to thaw them by heating or micro waving. The mice are best offered away from the substrate if you are using wood chips or similar. Either place the mice in a bowl or on a dish and place them in the cage, or offer the mouse to the snake using special tongs.

Be aware that if the corn snake is hungry it may hurl itself at the prey, so avoid using your fingers! The food is rapidly swallowed whole. The snake then spends the next 24-48 hours or so digesting. Corn snakes that are preparing to shed will usually not eat until after they have shed.

8-12 week old snakes can be offered 1 "pinkie" every 3-5 days. Older snakes can be offered 2 "pinkies" or 1 "fuzzy" every 4-7 days. The mice offered should not be more than 1¼ the size of the snake's girth at its widest point.

Fresh water should be provided daily in a reasonable sized bowl which is fairly heavy to avoid it being tipped over. Water also helps snakes during shedding when they may bathe in the water.

If the snake defaecates in its water bowl, the bowl must be cleaned and disinfected immediately. Use bottled water until the snake is at least 1 year old to avoid build up of chemicals.

Place the water bowl at the cold end of the tank.

Handling

Corn snakes are docile snakes. They will happily allow handling and climb over and around their owner, as well as anything else they find. Do not handle a snake for at least 24-48 hours after it has eaten as it will regurgitate its half-digested meal.

Children handling any snake should be supervised, and no child under 5 should handle one.

Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling any reptile.

Miscellaneous

Simply put, corn snakes are probably the best and easiest pet snake to keep and make a good introduction to keeping snakes and other reptiles.

There are several good books on keeping corn snakes, including titles by Kathy Love and R D and Patricia Bartlett.

Emergency Service

Parkvets has a vet on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In the event of an emergency, day or night, you should always telephone your usual Parkvets clinic and you will be given the appropriate information on what to do. Alternatively, call the emergency number 020 8300 8111

And Finally

We hope that you will have lots of fun and pleasure from your corn snake over the coming years. We trust he or she will enjoy good health and hope we can help you to achieve this.

Should you need further advice about the health or welfare of your corn snake then please contact us at the practice.

Special Offer for Ruxley Manor Garden Centre Customers

For your peace of mind Parkvets have teamed up with Ruxley Manor Garden Centre to offer you a 10% discount on your corn snake's first health check up. Visit our website at www.parkvets.com to find a Parkvets clinic near you.

You should obtain a voucher from Ruxley Manor Garden Centre and present it plus your receipt to Parkvets to claim your discount.