

ASSIGNMENT 216 TASK 1 HANDOUT

SNAKE HEALTH

Condition of Skin and Scales



Snakes are reptiles. They have dry scaly skins made of a strong material a bit like our finger nails. The scales are watertight so that the snake can keep moisture in and so not dry out in the heat.

When you touch a snake it feels warm and dry.

All snakes lose their skin on a regular basis, indeed this can happen several times a year. As the snake grows its scaly skin becomes too small for its body. The snake sheds this outer layer, which is thin but strong. Underneath is a new layer which is the same but fits the growing snake.

Skin infection (dermatitis) is often seen in snakes (and other reptiles) kept in environments that are too moist and/or dirty. Snakes may have red, inflamed skin with numerous small, blister-like lesions that may be on the underside of the snake making them easy to miss.

There are numerous factors that may lead to dysecdysis, or abnormal shedding in snakes. Two of the most commonly seen reasons include malnutrition and humidity levels being too high or too low for the species of snakes. One of the main reasons snakes shed their skin is to remove any parasites or collected bacteria.

Scale rot can be caused by unhygienic conditions, excessive moisture or a vitamin deficiency. Symptoms may include scale discoloration, softening of the skin surface, blisters or bruising. Consult your vet for treatment.

Behaviour and posture

Most commonly kept snakes are adaptable. Some are quiet, some are positively secretive, a few are active. Some are nocturnal, some are diurnal. Although free snakes may wander widely, most quickly become accustomed to the confines of a terrarium.

Signs of abnormal behaviour:

Hyperalertness - Abnormal high level of alertness 'nervousness' to environmental stimuli.

Rapid body movement - Abnormal 'jerky' locomotor or jumping actions.

Flattened body posture - Flattening of body against a surface often combined with hyperalertness.



Appetite and water intake

Appetite all depends on your snake's age, size, and activity level.

Smaller or younger snakes usually eat twice each week, while larger, more mature snakes typically eat once every week or two. Female snakes approaching breeding season can be fed more frequently.

Snakes do not need to eat every day. The frequency at which they need to eat is determined by their size and age. Some of the things a pet snake might eat include: Baby mice or rats, Adult mice or rats, Young



birds like chicks. When feeding snakes, there are some guidelines to keep in mind. It is not recommended to provide live prey as this can lead to prey bites to the snake. If possible, it's also ideal not to feed the snake in their own enclosure, and instead move them to another spot first to prevent cage aggression and ingestion of substrate. Refusing to eat is a signal that your snake is stressed. It should come as no surprise that snakes are routine animals and don't like change so very much. If your snake has just been

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brought to his new home and is not eating, there are very high chances that your snake is refusing food due to the stress of moving.

Snakes have a low metabolic rate, so they don't need to drink water as frequently as mammals do. The amount of water they need to consume also depends on the species, size, and the environment they live in. For example, snakes that live in arid environments require less water than those living in humid climates.

Movement

Lateral undulation is the type of locomotion usually associated with snakes (i.e. side to side wriggling). At any given time various areas of the snake's body are pushing simultaneously against a number of fixed points. As the snake moves forward new contact points are made.

The caterpillar is the most common way snakes move. It's also called lateral undulation and it's how most snakes get around. The snake uses its belly scales to grip the ground, then pushes its body forward, then pulls it back.

Stargazing syndrome in snakes is characterised by a snake turning the head and neck and staring upward. It is known as stargazing, as the snake looks as if he is staring at the sky and stars. This syndrome is the result of an underlying disorder, which can be determined by a veterinarian.

Stargazing syndrome in snakes is more of a term rather than a specific diagnosis. This behaviour is characterised by the snake's head and neck turning toward the "sky" as if they are looking up. This syndrome is typically a result of other illnesses. It may be a sign of a central nervous system issue known as inclusion body disease. This disease typically affects boas and pythons, and is considered to be a retrovirus which can be fatal. There are other reasons, however, that your snake may be stargazing, and these reasons can be found by your veterinarian by performing laboratory testing.



Condition of eyes, ears, nose and mouth

Eyes

Snakes have poor eyesight compared to other reptiles, although they still see colour and ultraviolet light. Snake eyelids are quite different from ours. If you look at your own eye you will see that you have a big upper eyelid which comes down to cover your eye when you blink, and a much smaller lower eyelid. Snakes do not have eyelids!

The coloured circle in your eye is called the iris; this determines whether the eyes are green, blue or brown. The pupil is in the centre of the iris; the pupil will be black and round and can become bigger or smaller depending on the amount of light in the environment. Snakes have round or slit-like pupils depending on whether they are a species that is awake during the day (diurnal) or night (nocturnal), and often the iris is the same colour as the pattern of their skin. The iris appears as slits when they are awake at night (nocturnal), and day time(diurnal) snakes tend to have a round pupil.

Snakes have tiny bones in the white part of their eyes called scleral ossicles; these help to strengthen the eyeball. Snakes are also unique as the outer eyelids have fused and become transparent. When the skin covers the eye, this is called the spectacle.

Ears

Snakes do not have an external ear, but they do have all the parts of the inner ear that we do. Their stapes—called a "columella"—is slightly different from ours in that it connects to the jawbone, enabling them to sense vibrations. However, they can only hear a portion of the sounds we hear.

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Nose

Instead of nostrils, snakes smell with a special organ, called the Jacobson's organ, on the roof of their mouths. Snakes use their tongues to grab chemicals (which smells are made of) from the environment.

Mouth

Snakes do not have the right kind of teeth to chew their food so they must eat their food whole. The jaws of snakes are not fused to the skull, so the lower jaw can separate from the upper jaw. This allows their mouths to open wider than their own bodies in order to swallow their prey whole.

Appearance of urine and faeces

Normal urates should be white (they can also be yellow, orange, or green), soft, chalky and rounded, if your snake's urates are very dry and hard that is an indication that they are dehydrated and may become impacted.

When determining whether your snake's poop is healthy and normal, look for the following components: Brown or black semi-formed logs of faeces (always) A chalky white part, known as the urates (always) A small amount of mucous (sometimes).

Signs of stress or pain that a snake may show

Vocal signs

The sound of a hiss comes from air passing in or out through the snake's mouth, as well as its nose; a hiss is the sound of a snake breathing in or out really heavily.

Snakes are not always happy about being handled, and a snake will let you know – with a hiss.

If your snake is hissing at you, it means it's feeling afraid, upset or annoyed. Any time your snake hisses at you, stop handling it and give it some time alone.



Visual signs

- Not eating. Your snake will refuse to eat, even if it's feeding time.
- Attempted escape. Your snake is trying to get away from what's bothering it.
- Nose rubbing.
- Tail rattling.
- Regurgitation.
- Constriction.
- Hissing.
- Striking.

The procedure to follow if an animal is found to be sick or injured

- Reporting and recording - Report to the manager immediately if a snake is sick or injured. A vet may need to be contacted in some cases. Record the illness or injury in the animals records and staff communication book so that all staff members are aware. Record any signs or symptoms, especially anything new relating to the illness or injury.

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- **Monitoring** - Keep a close eye on the snake and monitor behaviour, eating and drinking and movement. Check on the sick or injured animal at least every hour and record your findings. Look out for any new symptoms.
- **Isolating** - Snakes are usually solitary, however if they are housed together you must isolate a sick or injured animal and place them in their own enclosure to prevent cross-contamination or further injury.
- **When to call the vet** - Always consult your manager before contacting the vet. Treatment from a vet should never be put off if the Snake is injured or sick. If you notice severe signs of stress, weight loss, not moving or laboured breathing you must contact the vet immediately.

The records kept to help maintain the health of animals

- **Age** - Knowing the age of a snake is important as they have different food requirements at different ages. They will also be less active as they become older so it is important to know the types of behaviour to expect relating to their age.
- **Type** - The type of snake should be recorded so that they are easily recognisable and they can be identified easily.
- **Diet** - The food source and amount should be recorded so that they are fed the correct quantities and food types needed to keep them healthy. It is also useful to see how much they are eating to check they are in good health and are receiving the correct requirements. If a snake has a diet related illness, recording their diet will help to eliminate any foods that maybe making them ill.
- **Weight** - A snake weight should be recorded to ensure there is no drastic weight gain or weight loss as this could indicate a serious health problem that may need addressing.
- **Comments** - Extra information relating to behaviour, sleeping patterns etc. should be added to provide a better understanding of the animals health.