

When This Reptile Stops Eating, Here's What to Do

People aren't the only ones who can become anorexic — these creatures do too. These eight reasons may give you a hint about why they're rejecting food. And what to take note of his 'strike against eating' that lasts more than a few weeks.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Anorexia, or loss of appetite, is a common problem of captive snakes. If your snake refuses to eat, it's important to determine why
- In an otherwise healthy snake, there are several situations in which he or she might choose not to eat
- Signs of illness in a snake coupled with anorexia should prompt a visit to a veterinarian experienced in reptile care
- Improving his environment and/or food and feeding technique are the first things to try with an otherwise healthy snake that is refusing to eat
- If your snake has been anorectic for some time, it's extremely important that he is rehydrated before attempting to feed

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Anorexia is the loss of appetite or failure to voluntarily eat. It can be the primary health problem or it can occur secondarily to other underlying problems.

Anorexia is a common problem of captive snakes, and while it's true snakes can go long periods without eating, it's important to learn the root cause when a pet snake loses his appetite. There are certain situations in which snakes often choose not to eat, including:¹

- The snake is in a new environment
- The snake is a newborn or is newly hatched and may not eat until after its first shed in 10 to 14 days
- The snake is in a pre-shed condition
- The snake is hyperactive due to the breeding season or in response to being captured
- The snake is in the latter stages of pregnancy
- The snake is hibernating, or attempting to
- The snake is older or larger, and tends to feed less often than younger, smaller snakes
- The snake is obese and is voluntarily fasting

If in addition to not eating your snake shows signs of illness such as sores in the mouth, vomiting, diarrhea or lack of stool, weight loss, abdominal swelling, depression, wheezing, abnormal discharges or abnormal posture, there's a high probability he is ill and needs to be seen immediately by a veterinarian with experience treating reptiles.

In an otherwise healthy snake, anorexia that lasts for more than a few weeks can make him more susceptible to infection. Severe and sometimes irreversible liver and kidney damage can occur if your snake loses a significant amount of weight.

Anorexia in a snake is often the result of him not feeling secure enough in his habitat to eat. This is your cue to improve his care and reduce stress.

Improving Your Snake's Immediate Environment

Typically the most common cause for anorexia in a healthy snake is a too-cool environment. Snakes are ectothermic — they can't generate their own body heat and rely on their environment to provide opportunities to thermoregulate.

Most snakes require a section of their enclosure to be between 75 and 85 degrees F to feel their best and have optimum digestion. Temperatures below that range can cause lethargy and digestive problems. Sluggish digestion means your snake's meals may literally rot inside him, causing serious illness, with vomiting as an early symptom.

Keeping a snake too hot all the time is also physiologically stressful, so make sure you've researched the preferred optimal temperature zone for the species you're keeping. Snakes need a large enough enclosure to have cool choices and warm choices within it. Most snakes enjoy "belly heat" (in the form of an under-tank heater on 1/4 of the cage, never a "heat rock" in the cage), but also require "radiant" heat from above.

Many snakes rely on light cycles to know when to breed, hibernate, and for other physiological processes. If your snake can't determine the time of day or the season, anorexia may be the result. In addition, inappropriate UV lighting can trigger a vitamin D deficiency that results in illness and secondary anorexia. Providing normal day/night lighting cycles is very important, remembering night time heat can be provided via a ceramic heat bulb, red, or blue heat light (heat without brightness).

Also, incorrect humidity levels can cause skin or respiratory disorders that result in a decrease in appetite, and substrate choices appropriate for the species of snake you are keeping are also important.

Another very common cause for a snake's anorexia is lack of privacy while feeding. Adding a hiding box or a natural bark or rock hideout to his habitat will be beneficial for reducing environmental stress. Alternatively, some snakes eat more readily when they are placed in a separate, more private "feed box" with their prey.

If there's an area of your snake's enclosure where he feels more secure, consistently place his food in that location to encourage him to feed. It's also important with a shy or nervous snake to not hover over him to see if he eats. Cover his enclosure and monitor his activity without being obtrusive. Keeping snakes in a quiet room of the house will also reduce their stress.

If your anorectic snake is sharing an enclosure with other snakes, try feeding him in a separate habitat. Sometimes just moving a snake to a new or different enclosure stimulates feeding.

It's also best to reduce handling of a nervous or newly acquired snake, and don't handle any snake a day or two after they eat, allowing digestion to begin to take place before encouraging physical activity.

Improving Your Snake's Food and/or Feeding System

The type of food you offer your snake and the way you present it to him may cause him to refuse to eat. Examples:²

- Some wild-caught snakes prefer brown rats and won't eat white lab rats
- Some snakes accustomed to feeding on mice will refuse to eat rats
- Some snakes used to live prey will refuse frozen thawed prey

Try introducing different food items if your snake is refusing to eat, and if possible, consult with whoever you acquired the snake from as to his former diet and feeding method.

It's important to feed your snake during his most active periods of the day or night, as he's apt to accept food more readily during that time. Always offer a large enough water bowl that the snake can soak to rehydrate himself, if he chooses to do so.

Also, if you feed live prey, you should remove it if your snake refuses to eat it after 30 minutes. Consider offering pre-killed vertebrate prey to prevent the potential suffering of both prey and snake. Additional suggestions to encourage your snake to eat:³

- Warm the prey before offering it to your snake
- "Jacket" the prey by putting the skin of another type of prey over it
- Break or cut the prey open so your snake smells blood
- Provide adequate hiding places for snakes that prefer to eat privately
- Move the dead prey around your snake's habitat to mimic live prey
- Offer prey late in the day and leave it overnight for nocturnal hunters
- Try a variety of colors of prey, as some snakes will only eat prey with a certain color fur
- Using feeding tongs, dangle the prey over the sensitive areas of your snake's head (the nostrils and around the mouth) to entice a feeding response
- "Scent" the prey by wiping it with a different prey item
- Offer a smaller size prey

Learn the Natural History of Your Snake

In order to feed your captive snake appropriately and in a way that will encourage him to eat, you need to understand the natural history of your pet.

For example, burrowing snakes require a habitat that contains sand or fine gravel so they can bury themselves. These snakes can often be triggered to strike at prey that is gently dragged across a sand substrate.

Tree-dwelling snakes need branches in their enclosure. These snakes may respond to prey that is hanging off the fork of a branch, but not to prey placed on the floor of the habitat.

And keep in mind that offering the wrong prey is very often the reason a captive snake refuses eat. Provide your snake with the prey items he would eat in the wild or substitute similar domestic food.

Re-Feeding Precautions

If your snake has been anorectic for some time, it's extremely important that he is rehydrated before attempting to feed. Initial feeding after a long fast should be started at very low levels to prevent excess calories and proteins from causing rapid uptake of glucose into the cells, which can result in a life-threatening drop in serum potassium levels.

Never "stack feed" snakes more than one prey item at a time to avoid impactions, and make sure your snake defecates after each feeding before offering food again.

Sources and References

[Pet Place](#)

¹ [Animal Hospitals-USA \(Archived\)](#).

^{2, 3} [Reptiles as Pets](#)
