

Problematic Snake Feeding



Unfortunately, feeding any snake is not always as simple as putting a mouse in the tank to find it gone the next morning. Occasionally the snake will refuse to feed and it may be tricky to get going again. There are all sorts of feeding hints and tips; however there is always a reason why a snake is not eating. Below there is a checklist of reasons, and then solutions to the problems:

1. Unsuitable vivarium / box
2. Insufficient heat
3. No cover or hiding area
4. Unsuitable food item
5. Recently Wild Caught animal
6. Other

1. Unsuitable Vivarium / Box

Generally when a snake refuses to feed, the first thing you should consider, especially if it has been recently purchased is if the environment is correct. Is your vivarium too large? It is possible to have something too small but this is rarely the case, as snakes often prefer tighter surroundings. Many keepers are so eager to put their hatchling snake in a 3 or 4ft vivarium that they are shocked to hear that this sort of treatment can eventually lead to the death of the snake. The vivarium / box should gradually get larger as the snake grows. For a hatchling snake a tupperware box no larger than the length of the snake should be provided.

2. Insufficient Heat

All snakes should have a thermal gradient, meaning they can go to one end of the enclosure to warm up, and move to the opposite end to cool off again. If the snake is kept too warm, its metabolic rate will speed up which will generally

not cause it to go off its food, but it will need more food to keep it going. If the snake is kept too cool, it may go off its food. Not only that, its metabolic rate will have slowed down causing the digestive system to function slower than usual, which may cause the snake to regurgitate any food which it may have swallowed.

3. No cover or hiding area

When keeping snakes in a tupperware box, a hiding place may not be totally necessary, especially if you have a deep layer of substrate for the snake to hide in. However, possibly the most crucial factor of keeping snakes is that they must feel secure. Whether you decide to use an ice cream tub, a cereal box or a naturalistic piece of cork bark, the snake must have an area to retreat where it feels safe.

The size of the hiding area is also important. It must be large enough to fit the snake in, with very little room for anything else. You may also use artificial plants and branches which cover a higher area in the vivarium. Some snakes may feel more secure among the leaves and branches.

If the snake refuses to feed with all these hiding places provided, it is worth placing the food in the hiding place itself, or in its entrance. The snake may feel secure, but not secure enough to venture out to feed. This technique often works with newly acquired specimens.

4. Unsuitable food item

There are many ways of offering your snake a food item. Firstly you need to figure out the size food item it needs. A rule of thumb is that the size of food offered should be no wider than the girth of the snake. If the snake refuses the food, try something smaller.

Below are some bullet points that explain different food items and your method of feeding them:

- Try offering mice and rats of varying sizes. If these fail, try chicks, gerbils, hamsters or similar sized rodents or birds.
- Many keepers believe certain snakes will only take particular coloured rodents. Try white, brown and black rodents or any other colours you can find.
- Scenting the food item with a lizard, frog, chick, fish, canned fish oil or a live mouse may stimulate its feeding response.
- Try using freshly killed mice, this will smell a lot more and should also still be warm. This method works in many cases and is worth considering.
- Try cutting the tip of the nose off the rodent to expose the flesh slightly.
- Braining is another method – this works by using a pin or a sharp knife and slicing the top of the rodent's head, exposing the brain. For some reason brain smells good to snakes!
- Do not touch the food item; occasionally if it smells the owner on the food, it will not go for it.
- Try heating up the rodent; put it on a heat mat for a few minutes, or dipping the head in boiling water. Be careful not to overheat the food item, as it may be so hot it will literally split the stomach, which is not pretty!
- Tease feeding is a method commonly used by many keepers; this involves a pair of long forceps or tweezers, and literally wriggling the food around in front of the snake, acting as if it was alive. If this fails, try lightly tapping the

snake on the nose with the food, sometimes they appear to strike out of anger, then if it connects with the rodents head it will often coil round and constrict as a natural reaction.

- Live feeding is a method which should be the last resort. There are many keepers which are capable of getting almost any snake feeding without resorting to feeding live. However the more novice keepers may not be capable of trying all the tricks of the trade. Before resorting to feeding live, phone around a few known herpetologists and ask for help. Any herpetologist who is a member of some type of club or organization is usually more than willing to lend a helping hand. Live feeding is not a bad thing in its own right, but often a snake will take to live food and begin to refuse anything else. Unless you have easy access to live mice, this should be avoided.

5. Recently Wild Caught Animal

This could possibly be the trickiest problem to solve in terms of feeding. A wild caught snake will have been feeding on live animals all of its life. So, to take it out of its natural environment into unfamiliar surroundings and offer it a dead mouse is often just asking too much! Not only will it have only fed on live, but it will have come across almost every animal which it naturally co-habitates with, such frogs, lizards, small rodents, birds and bird eggs, plus other smaller snakes and many more potential food sources. The snake could have been feeding on a dozen or so food items throughout its life, so be sure to try as much as possible.

6. Other

Breeding season is a common time when snakes will go off their food. Males very often refuse to feed because they are thinking more about mating than anything else. This is well known with many snakes and generally starts from February through to May depending on the breeding cycle of the snake in question. Females rarely go off their food when it comes to breeding, as they need all the fat reserves to produce the eggs. It is not uncommon however for the female to stop feeding about a month or so before she lays her eggs. The reason for this is not quite clear, it could be because the eggs take up so much room in the snake's body, it may become hard to digest and process the food. The only solution to this is to wait and keep trying, it should not last longer than 2-3 months and for a healthy snake, it will not be affected.

Stress is a big killer in snakes, and it can be bought on by many reasons. One major factor is over handling. Many owners buy a pet snake and all they want to do is play with it. This is commonplace, but the snake needs its own time just like anyone else. I suggest for a newly acquired hatchling snake it should be handled for no more than 20 minutes per day. This can be spread out into 10 minute intervals if you wish, but the less you handle it the better. As it grows older and becomes more accustomed to you; you can gradually handle it more and more. If the snake refuses to feed, the first thing you should do is to stop handling it as it just adds more stress.



Other methods for non - feeders

1. Drying the snake out – This method stimulates the snake to look for moisture which can be in a food item. Take the water bowl out for about a week and move the temperature up just a couple of degrees. After a week, soak an appropriate sized rodent in water to defrost, and offer it to the snake dripping wet. Make sure the snake is not offered the food item on a substrate such as wood chips or aspen. You should keep your snake on newspaper for this whole process. If the snake begins to look at all emaciated, place the water back in immediately. This whole process should be monitored extremely carefully.
2. If the snake is very young or small, try offering the tails of rodents, or chick legs. These are easier to swallow and may stimulate them to feed. If it will only eat these food items instead of pinky mice, you must coat them in a vitamin and calcium supplement. A good balanced vitamin supplement is Repton.
3. Try offering the food at different times of the day. Most snakes are primarily nocturnal; however they may prefer to take the food in the early hours of the morning rather than evening.
4. Place the food in different areas of the vivarium. Try up higher in a branch or underneath the hiding area. Many keepers have had success by placing a rodent in the middle of a toilet roll. The snake will feel secure in this and is a perfect hide area to safely eat its prey.
5. The temperature of the food is sometimes a stimulant. Keep the food at normal room temperature to begin with, but if this fails, place it on a radiator or something similar until the food item is hot.
6. If your snake is a hatchling, try and find a small, dark pot with a secure lid. The tubs which wax moth larvae are offered in are perfect. Place a pinkie and the snake in this tub together and then place in a warm area; but not directly on a heat source. Leave it over night and with any luck the food will have disappeared. Try also to use the braining method and placing it in the tub.

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