



Introduction to Corn Snake Care

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Corn snakes are slender, mid-size colubrid snakes that typically grow 4 to 6 feet in length. Due to decades of captive breeding, they are available in a wide variety of colors and patterns. Corn snakes are native to the southeastern and central United States and are known for being hardy and relatively easy to care for when their basic needs are met. With proper care, corn snakes commonly live 10 to 15 years in captivity.



Housing

Corn snakes are excellent escape artists. A secure enclosure with a locking lid is essential.

- Hatchlings: 10-gallon reptile tank
- Juveniles: 30" x 12" enclosure (approximately a 20-gallon long)
- Adults: Minimum of 36" long x 18" wide (40 breeder size); larger enclosures are always better

The enclosure should include:

- At least two hiding places (one on the warm side, one on the cool side)
- Low branches or climbing structures
- Substrate deep enough for burrowing (at least a few inches)
- A water dish large enough for the snake to soak its coiled body

Fresh water should be provided daily or whenever soiled. Water dishes should be sanitized at least once weekly.

Substrate options

- Aspen shavings designed for reptiles
- Recycled paper bedding

Corn snakes defecate frequently, sometimes more than once per week. Spot clean soiled substrate promptly and replace all substrate at least once monthly.

Never use cedar or pine shavings, as the aromatic oils can cause irritation and respiratory issues.

Temperature and Lighting

Corn snakes do not require tropical conditions.

- Basking spot: 85 to 90°F
- Warm side: 80 to 82°F
- Cool side: 75 to 78°F
- Nighttime: Can safely drop to 65 to 68°F

Heat sources may include basking bulbs, ceramic heat emitters, or under-tank heating mats. All heat sources must be regulated with a thermostat or dimmer to prevent overheating.

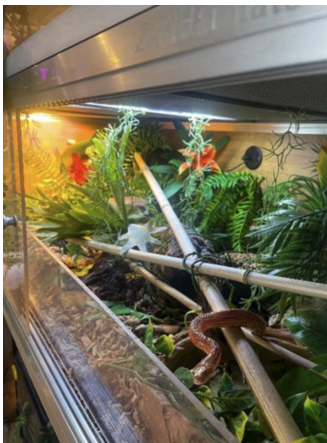
Use reliable thermometers to monitor temperatures. Infrared temperature guns are useful for checking multiple areas within the enclosure.

UVB lighting

While research is ongoing, some corn snakes show improved activity and feeding responses when provided with UVB lighting.

- A 5% UVB bulb is appropriate
- Linear bulbs (T5 or T8) provide more consistent output than compact bulbs
- Replace compact bulbs every 3 to 6 months and linear bulbs every 8 to 10 months

If your snake avoids the basking area, temperatures may be too warm. If your snake spends all its time basking, the enclosure may be too cool elsewhere.



Humidity

Corn snakes thrive at a humidity level of approximately 40 percent. This is usually achieved by providing a large water dish.

Avoid waterlogged substrate, as excessive moisture can lead to bacterial growth and respiratory disease.

Higher humidity of 50 to 60 percent is recommended during shedding. Humidity can be monitored with a hygrometer.

Diet

Corn snakes eat rodents in captivity. Frozen-thawed mice are the safest feeding option.

- Hatchlings: Every 5 to 7 days
- Juveniles: Every 7 to 10 days
- Adults: Every 10 to 14 days

The prey item should be roughly equal in width to the widest part of the snake's body. Feeding on a flat dish can help reduce ingestion of substrate.

Your snake should be eating consistently before being brought home.

Handling

Young corn snakes may be fast, wiggly, and defensive. Tail rattling is common and does not indicate aggression. Most corn snakes become calmer with age.

- Allow several days to settle into a new enclosure before handling
- Ideally, wait until the snake has eaten at least two meals
- Keep handling sessions brief at first
- Always lift from underneath, not from above
- Support the body and allow the snake to move slowly from hand to hand
- Handle close to the ground to prevent injury from falls
- Do not handle for at least 24 hours after feeding

Signs of Illness

Knowing what is normal for your corn snake is essential. Become familiar with your snake's appetite, activity level, and normal appearance of urine and stool.

Signs of illness include:

- Refusal to feed for two or more consecutive scheduled feedings
- Failure to produce stool within seven to ten days after feeding
- Difficulty shedding or retained eye caps
- Abdominal swelling
- Regurgitation (vomiting)
- Diarrhea, foul-smelling stool, or straining to pass stool
- Open-mouth breathing or difficulty breathing
- Discharge from the eyes, nostrils, or mouth
- Weakness, lethargy, depression, or inactivity
- Lumps, bumps, or cuts on the skin
- Reproductive problems including egg binding or infected or impacted hemipenes

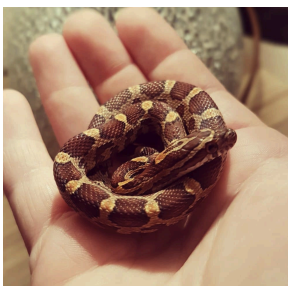
If any of these signs are observed, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Preventive Care

Good husbandry is the foundation of long-term health.

- Check enclosure temperatures daily, especially during seasonal changes
- Remove feces and shed skin promptly and perform full enclosure cleaning monthly
- Confirm all enclosure latches and locks are secure
- Keep a feeding log including prey size and acceptance or refusal
- Schedule a yearly wellness examination to monitor health at every life stage

Proper environment, consistent feeding, and early veterinary care help ensure your corn snake lives a long, healthy life.





Ferguson Zones: Matching UVB to Your Reptile

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

Zone 1: Crepuscular or Shade Dwellers

Very low UVB exposure

These species spend most of their time in shade, dense cover, or are active at dawn and dusk. They receive little direct sunlight in the wild.

Examples:

- Crested geckos
- Gargoyle geckos
- African fat-tailed geckos
- Corn snakes
- Ball pythons



Key point for owners:

These species still benefit from **low-level UVB**, but excessive UVB can be harmful.

Zone 2: Partial Sun or Occasional Baskers

Low to moderate UVB exposure

These reptiles move between shade and sunlight and bask intermittently rather than continuously.

Examples:

- (juveniles and non-dominant adults often fall here)
- Blue-tongue skinks
- Uromastyx (when not actively basking)
- Green anoles
- Some box turtles



Key point for owners:

UVB should be available, but animals must always have shaded areas to self-regulate exposure.

Zone 3: Open or Partial Sun Baskers

Moderate to high UVB exposure

These reptiles bask regularly and are adapted to brighter environments, but still retreat to shade.

Examples:

- Adult bearded dragons
- Veiled chameleons
- Panther chameleons
- Red-eared sliders and other basking aquatic turtles
- Spiny-tailed lizards

Key point for owners:

These species **require reliable UVB** to remain healthy and are at high risk for metabolic bone disease without it.



Zone 4: Full Sun Baskers

High UVB exposure

These reptiles live in very bright, open environments and bask for prolonged periods under intense sunlight.

Examples:

- Uromastyx species
- Desert tortoises
- Sulcata tortoises
- Rock agamas

Key point for owners:

Strong UVB is essential, but enclosure setup must still allow distance and shade to prevent overexposure.



Important Reminder for Clients

These zones are **general guidelines**, not rigid rules.

Factors that influence UVB needs include:

- Species
- Age
- Behavior
- Enclosure design
- Distance from the bulb
- Screen tops and materials

Always research species-specific needs before acquiring a reptile, and consult a veterinarian experienced in reptile medicine to confirm proper lighting for your individual pet.



Reptile Lighting: Why It Matters

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Proper lighting is one of the most important parts of reptile care, yet it is also one of the most misunderstood. Inadequate lighting is a leading cause of metabolic bone disease and other serious health problems in reptiles.

This handout explains what ultraviolet (UV) lighting is, why reptiles need it, and how to choose and maintain the correct lighting for your pet.

Understanding UV Light

Ultraviolet (UV) light is radiation that exists beyond the visible light spectrum. It comes in three forms:

- UVA
- UVB
- UVC

Only UVA and UVB are relevant and safe for reptiles.

UVA

- Helps regulate daily biological rhythms and behavior
- Important for normal activity, appetite, and reproduction

UVB (Most Critical)

- Essential for calcium metabolism
- Allows reptiles to properly absorb calcium from their diet
- Prevents metabolic bone disease, a painful and often fatal condition

How UVB Works in the Body

UVB light activates vitamin D precursors in the skin, allowing reptiles to produce vitamin D3 naturally. Vitamin D3 is required for calcium to move from the gut into the bloodstream and into bones.

Research shows that:

- **Naturally produced vitamin D3** (via UVB exposure) is safer and more effective than oral supplementation in diurnal (day-active) reptiles
- **Some nocturnal species**, such as leopard geckos and corn snakes, can also benefit from low-level UVB exposure

Sunlight vs Indoor Lighting

Reptiles living outdoors receive UVB directly from the sun.

However:

- UVB does NOT pass through glass
- Placing a reptile near a window does not provide UVB

Indoor reptiles must be provided with artificial UVB lighting using bulbs specifically designed for reptiles.

Choosing the Right UVB Bulb

High-quality reptile UVB bulbs are essential. Brands commonly recommended include:

- Zoo Med
- Arcadia
- Reptisun

The type and strength of bulb needed depends on the species and natural habitat of your reptile.

Ferguson Zones: Matching UVB to Your Reptile

Reptiles are grouped into **Ferguson Zones** based on how much sunlight they naturally receive in the wild:

- **Zone 1:** Crepuscular or shade dwellers
- **Zone 2:** Partial sun or occasional baskers
- **Zone 3:** Open or partial sun baskers
- **Zone 4:** Full sun baskers

Knowing your reptile's Ferguson Zone helps determine:

- UVB intensity
- Bulb type
- Distance from the basking area

Ask your veterinarian if you are unsure which zone your reptile falls into.

Proper Placement of UVB Lighting

Correct placement is just as important as the bulb itself.

Fluorescent UVB Bulbs

- Reptile should be able to get within 12–18 inches of the bulb
 - Use branches or logs to allow climbing closer if needed
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Mercury Vapor Bulbs

- Must be placed at least 12 inches from the basking area
- These bulbs produce both heat and UVB and can overheat reptiles if too close

Screen Tops Matter

- Dense screen lids can block up to 50% of UVB
- Enclosures with heavy screening may require stronger bulbs or multiple fixtures

Measuring UVB

- Solar meters can be used to accurately measure UVB output and ensure proper exposure
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Bulb Replacement Schedule

UVB bulbs must be replaced regularly, even if they still look bright.

- Replace every 6–12 months, depending on the bulb model
 - UVB output declines long before visible light burns out
 - Date bulbs when installed to track replacement timing
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Key Takeaways for Reptile Owners

- UVB lighting is essential for bone health and calcium metabolism
 - Windows do not provide usable UVB
 - Proper bulb type, placement, and replacement are critical
 - UVB needs vary by species and natural habitat
 - When in doubt, ask your veterinarian for guidance
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If you need help selecting the correct lighting for your reptile or want your setup reviewed, please contact your veterinary team. Proper lighting is one of the most powerful tools you have to keep your reptile healthy.