

Snakes



Snakes

There are about 3500 known species of snakes living in the world today. They are found on every continent, except Antarctica. However snakes are not found on some islands such as New Zealand, Iceland and Ireland.

Snakes inhabit a variety of environments. They have adapted to life in tropical rainforests, mountainous regions, grasslands, swamps and deserts. Some snakes can even live in the ocean!



Snake Offspring

Snakes are reptiles. Most reptiles are oviparous, which means that they lay eggs. Their eggs often have a soft, leathery exterior. Once a clutch of eggs is laid the mother generally does not care for the young. An exception is the python which wraps its body around the eggs to protect them and regulate their temperature.

Some snakes are ovoviviparous, which means that they carry their eggs inside their bodies. The egg shells thin and disappear by the time the offspring are fully developed. These snakes then give birth to live babies. Species such as boas, rattlesnakes and garter snakes are born in this way.



What do snakes eat?

Snakes are carnivorous. They capture their prey by either constriction (squeezing their prey) or envenomation (by injecting poison with their fangs). Snakes then swallow their prey whole, head first so that limbs do not get stuck along the way! Some snakes even swallow their prey live.

A snake has specially adapted bone structure that helps it swallow prey that is bigger than the width of its own body. Not only can the jaw unhinge from the skull, the two halves of the jaw itself are elastically connected so that they can spread wide apart to accommodate large prey.

The powerful muscles along the body move with a rippling effect to force the prey down into the digestive tract. Once a snake has swallowed its prey it will need to rest quietly while the food digests. The snake will not need to eat again for many weeks.



Moulting

Our skin is constantly renewing itself. You can't see it but we lose tiny pieces of the outer layer of our skin every day. When we grow, our skin grows with us. We are constantly generating new skin. Some animals lose the outer layer of their skin all at once, revealing freshly generated skin underneath. This process is called moulting but when snakes moults it is called shedding.

Snakes shed their skins a couple of times a year when they are adults. When they are younger it happens more frequently to accommodate their growth. The whole outer layer of skin will be released, including the film that covers their eyes.

When the snake's body is ready to begin the shedding process its body will release a milky substance just under the outer layer of skin. This makes the skin look a bit dull for a few days. It also makes the eyes look cloudy. The substance helps the old skin separate from the new skin underneath.

In a few days the snake will begin to rub itself against hard surfaces to pierce the old skin near the top of its head. The skin usually comes away in one piece as the snake wriggles free. A partial shed may cause problems for the snake, especially if the skin around the head and the eye caps do not come away cleanly.



Milky looking eyes mean that the snake will be ready to shed its skin in a few days.



The old skin usually comes away in one piece.

Protection Against Predators

Snakes need to protect themselves from predators that are larger than themselves.

Many snakes rely on camouflage. They tend to be a similar colour to their surroundings, with markings that help them to blend in. When they are under attack they will rear up and strike with their fangs.

Some snakes have developed habits that ward off potential predators. A cobra will rear up and flatten its neck, exposing two large eye-like markings on the front and back of its neck. It makes the snake look like a much bigger and scarier animal, hopefully frightening off the predator in the process!

A rattlesnake will curl itself into a circle and raise its tail. When it shakes its tail it makes a rattling noise. This is enough to frighten some predators away. It also distracts the opponent, giving the snake more time to strike when threatened.



Left: A rattlesnake raises its tail to warn off potential predators.

Right: A king cobra rears up and flattens its neck to reveal a large hood to frighten away predators.

