

Farting Snake

Do snakes pass gas?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Q. I've heard that some snakes in the wild pass gas to deter predators. My black Mexican kingsnake has been making farting sounds lately, and we're not sure if he has been doing it to scare our cat away from his cage (which is securely covered and cat-proof) or if he's just excreting the remains of his latest meal. Because he hasn't been eating much during this cold winter, I'm starting to suspect that maybe it's defensive, but now I'm concerned that there might be a deeper health issue. Is making these sounds normal for a snake of this variety? He seems otherwise healthy.

Thank you for your time,
Katherine

A. You have asked an interesting question. I think that you might be confused about what snakes do to deter predators. They don't pass gas, but they often will defecate and urinate in an attempt to scare predators off. Some snakes also have well-developed musk or scent glands that open into the vent, and those species will often release this odiferous, noxious liquid when alarmed or threatened. It is a nasty-smelling liquid, for sure.

Passing gas is another matter altogether. Healthy reptiles don't usually generate much gas in the gastrointestinal tract. Excessive gas could mean that the reptile is suffering from an intestinal problem. This could occur from bacterial, viral, fungal, protozoal, parasitic, tumor-related, obstruction or husbandry issues. For example, if your snake bruminated (went through a winter cool-down period) too soon after consuming a large meal, then he might have developed maldigestion issues, resulting in excess gas in the digestive tract.

You didn't tell me about the husbandry for your snake. Make sure that you are keeping him within the correct temperature range. You should make an appointment with a qualified herp vet to have him checked out. If possible, bring in a fresh fecal sample (you can refrigerate it wrapped in plastic until your vet visit) for parasite analysis.

I seriously doubt that your snake is passing gas to scare off your cat. There is another reason, most likely medical, so I would strongly recommend that you find a herp vet who can help you with your kingsnake.

Need a Herp Vet?

If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking the list of members on the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarian (ARAV) website at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.

Or, check out the state by state ReptileChannel Vet Listings.