

Prolapsed Hemipenis In Snake

What's the proper procedure for a reptile dealing with a prolapsed hemipenis?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Q. I have a 6-foot, male red-tailed boa with a prolapsed hemipenis. There are no herp vets in my area. What can I do? I know he will die without help, and we love him so.

A. When the hemipenis of a male snake prolapses and does not retract back inside, this is called paraphimosis. There is often a secondary bacterial infection from being exposed, and it may also become necrotic (meaning the tissue is dying or dead).

You need to find a herp vet who can work with you, as there is no way that you can try to correct this on your own. Sedation is required so that the tissue can be cleaned, evaluated and replaced, if possible. Often, edema (a type of swelling from fluid retention) is present and this needs to be addressed prior to attempting to replace the prolapse.

Perhaps you can call some local vets and see if any of them would be willing to see your snake and work with you. If they use one of the larger labs (such as Antech, the lab that I do consulting for), they can call for a free consultation with an experienced herp vet who can help them with your case and can even walk them through the procedures involved.

If it is possible to have the prolapse reduced, a type of suture, called a purse-string, is placed to hold the cloaca partially closed, which will prevent the prolapse from reoccurring. Antibiotics are given if there is evidence of infection.

It is also very important to attempt to determine why the hemipenis prolapsed in the first place. Different potential causes include trauma, traction during copulation, infection, inflammation, neurologic deficits involving the retractor muscles or cloacal sphincter muscles or from impaction of the cloaca with urates.

If severe infection and necrosis are present, it might be necessary to amputate the hemipenis. This won't compromise the ability to urinate because the organ is copulatory only and not involved with urination. It also might be necessary to amputate the hemipenis if it prolapses repeatedly. In snakes and lizards, amputation of one hemipenis does not affect reproduction, because they possess two. Amputation should be performed under general anesthesia, so obviously this procedure requires the expertise of a herp vet.

Please don't hesitate any longer. You need to find a vet who can help you, and you need to find one now, before the damaged tissue becomes any worse. Even in an area where there aren't any vets experienced with herps, you should be able to find one willing to help, especially with the support of the consultation service available to them from the major laboratories. If you really love your boa, you will find a way to get him the help he needs.

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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) web site at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.