

Respiratory Problems in Reptiles

My snakes have breathing problems. What should I do?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Question 1: I have a two year old boa and he hasn't eaten in three months. His nose is very dry and his breathing is crackly. What is wrong, and how do I fix it?

Question 2: My ball python was making some "popping" noises today, and I was wondering if that was because he had just eaten the night before, or if it was a sign of respiratory infection?

These two questions were submitted recently, and because they are similar, I am lumping them together to answer both.

Of course, I will admonish both of my writers, because by providing me with just the bare minimum of information, it really limits how detailed and precise my answer can be. Please, if you plan to write in and ask a question, provide me with the temperature range in the habitat, the temperature high in the basking spot, cage substrate, lighting used (and how often changed or replaced, especially for UVB lighting), the normal diet that you feed, how often you feed, your water delivery system, how often you clean the habitat and what agents you clean with, any changes to behavior or condition that you have noticed, any medications that you have administered yourself and any other pets you have in your home. This information will allow me to better assess your herp's situation.

Evaluating a herp by the dryness of the nose is not any way to accurately assess its condition, just as a dog having a cold, wet nose versus a dry nose is really not any way to tell if a dog is sick or not.

Crackly breathing is not a good thing. Some snakes may have an audible sound when they breathe, during or right before the shedding process, from the skin expanding and contracting when it inhales and exhales, and that is not a sign of disease or illness. However, crackles (also called rales) that occur from small amounts of fluid and mucus in the lungs or air sacs, indicate respiratory disease, is usually indicative of serious infection.

If you are at all concerned by hearing the breathing sounds, then both of you should make appointments with your herp veterinarians to have your snakes evaluated, tested and treated, if necessary. For case number one, I would recommend that you definitely seek veterinary care for your snake as soon as possible. Because your snake hasn't eaten for several months (and those were the colder winter months), I wonder if perhaps your snake has been chilled excessively, with that resulting in suppression of the immune system, leading to pneumonia. If you think that the habitat's temperature might have dropped too low during the winter, then make sure you tell your herp vet about that.

You won't be able to accurately diagnose and treat your snake without the expertise of a good herp veterinarian. This could be bacterial pneumonia, and it might be necessary for you to administer antibiotics by injection, as well as nebulization therapy. Parasites can also cause respiratory problems, including lungworms, migrating aberrant ascarid or hookworm parasites, pentastomids or trematodes. Diagnosis and treatment of these conditions also require the help of a qualified herp veterinarian.

Boids (boas and pythons) are also susceptible to viral infections. The most important one is inclusion body disease (IBD), a suspected retrovirus. Your snakes would have to have been exposed to an infected snake in order to acquire this disease, or in some cases, infected mites might be able to pass this virus from one snake to another. Snakes infected with IBD might show respiratory signs or nervous system signs. Your vet can perform special tests (such as a biopsy of a pharyngeal tonsil) in order to attempt diagnosis of IBD. Hopefully, this progressive and incurable viral disease is not the problem with either of these two snakes.

For case number two, the popping noises that you heard are of concern to me. They are not a sign of anything related to normal feeding, as far as I know. I have seen cases where an owner force-fed a snake, and managed to damage the respiratory system, resulting in air under the skin (called subcutaneous emphysema). But, if your ball python ate a normal rodent without incident, then that should also not be an issue. If you don't think the sounds you are hearing are due to skin issues (getting ready to shed or shedding), or if the sounds continue, I would recommend making an appointment with your herp vet for evaluation. Hopefully, it's nothing to worry about, but if it persists, it is worth a trip to the vet.

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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.