

Prolapsed Hemipenis in Snake

What causes, and how do you treat, a prolapsed hemipenis in a snake?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I bought a ball python who is about 18 to 20 inches. He has been eating regularly and seems to be very happy. He has shed once already, and it was a full shed. I have kept the temperature and everything else in good shape. When he recently excreted feces, a little pink thing came out of his hole. I have seen him do that before. However, this time, the pink thing stayed out. I am concerned something is wrong. I plan on taking him to the veterinarian as soon as I can, but I was hoping to get an answer from you. Thank you.

What you are describing is a prolapse. If you know for sure your python is a male, then what he is most likely prolapsing is one hemipenis. Male snakes have two hemipenes used for copulation. They are normally situated in blind sacs behind the cloaca, what you called his hole. On occasion, one or both of these organs may pop out of the sac during defecation or during periods of sexual activity.

This situation will require veterinary assistance, so please do make an appointment to have him examined and treated as soon as possible. In the meantime, keep the organ clean and moist by gently rinsing it with saline – like the kind you can use to rinse contact lenses – and then apply a light layer of a water-soluble gel, like K-Y jelly.

We don't always know why a hemipenis may prolapse, but it is not an infrequent occurrence.

Your herp veterinarian will examine your snake and perhaps run some lab tests. You may wish to take in a fresh fecal specimen so your herp veterinarian can perform some tests for internal parasites. Your snake will require anesthesia for the prolapse replacement. Sometimes the organ will become swollen, and a hygroscopic agent may be used to draw out some of the swelling. Once the organ has been replaced, often a suture is used to help hold it in place. This will usually be removed in a few days.

If the damage to the hemipenis is too severe, then the herp veterinarian may elect to surgically amputate the tissue. This will not affect your snake's ability to reproduce, as it only takes one hemipenis for successful copulation. Because the organ is used solely for reproduction, it won't affect his ability to urinate.

Of course, I am speculating about what you are describing. The pink thing you have described is most likely a hemipenis, but there is a chance that it is a tumor, mass or some other type of tissue. Please make an appointment and have your snake checked as soon as possible.

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.