

Snake Has Repeated Prolapses

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By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

My 105-gram baby python, which is only 5 months old, has repeatedly prolapsed his intestines over the last two months. Each time, the prolapse was put back in place and was held in by a suture around the cloaca. However, if the suture is removed, the intestines just fall out again. Do you think my baby can be cured?

This is a tough one. What we don't know is why your snake keeps prolapsing. The surgery to replace the intestines and apply a purse-string suture is just treating the symptoms and not dealing with the underlying cause.

This could be caused by a birth defect. It could have initially occurred as a result of straining from constipation or from straining due to diarrhea, either of which could have damaged the nerves, muscles and connective tissues that hold the intestines in place. The nerves and muscles of the cloaca could also have been damaged. Once those structures were damaged, stretched or torn, re-prolapsing would then be likely, because the lack of integrity of the tissue would prevent normal function. Parasitic diseases, such as *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia* or *Microsporidium*, could also cause chronic intestinal problems resulting in prolapse, perhaps. These organisms can be quite difficult to diagnose in many cases.

Unfortunately, we are somewhat limited in what diagnostics can be safely performed on such a small patient. In larger herps, it is possible to run a complete blood count and plasma chemistry panel, radiographs including a barium series and perhaps tissue biopsies, but with your 105-gram snake, we are not able to draw enough blood to safely run the necessary tests all at once. It would be required that blood be drawn every few weeks, to allow the patient to safely regenerate his blood in between. Also, anesthesia and surgery are more problematic in such a small patient, although the procedures are possible.

At some point, you must decide if you are being fair to your snake by repeatedly having prolapse surgery performed on him. If you can find a referral center or very experienced herp veterinarian who can help you in diagnosing why your snake keeps prolapsing, you might have a chance to correct the problem. If infectious causes are ruled out, it might be possible to tack the intestines to the body wall to prevent future prolapses, but this can be risky in such a small patient. You have some serious decisions ahead of you, and I encourage you to ask your vet about your options and possible referral.

Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP has been an avian/exotic/herp animal veterinarian since 1981. She is a regular contributor to REPTILES magazine.

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.