

Snake Yawning or Gaping

My reptile seems to gape for air. What could be wrong with it?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have a Pueblan milk snake, and she hasn't eaten for a couple of months. She is moving very slowly and is not active like she used to be when I first bought her. Once in a while, she opens her mouth widely and seems like she needs to get some air into her lung. I gave her a medicine that was recommended by the pet shop owner. She is getting better. Before, she wouldn't flick her tongue, but now she is flicking her tongue a lot.

My question is: What kind of disease does she have? How can I prevent this in the future? I use Repti-Bark for bedding and I keep her at a temperature range of between 70 degrees Fahrenheit at night and 90 degrees during the day.

The only way to find out what is wrong with your snake is to have it examined by a veterinarian who has knowledge of herp medicine. While some pet retailers sell over-the-counter medications for animals, without knowing what is causing the illness, it is not a good practice to just pick a medication based on the clinical signs. This is because many different organisms can cause similar signs. Without appropriate testing, one can only guess at what is making your pet ill. Also, drugs available without a prescription (known as over-the-counter) are "older" antibiotics that most disease-causing bacteria are almost always resistant to, meaning that the bacteria won't be affected by the antibiotic. Medications must be dosed correctly, based on the pet's body weight, measured in grams.

I am concerned about the "yawning" because if she is doing it frequently, it can be a sign of respiratory disease. She may have pneumonia, and if she does, this is often a critical illness requiring aggressive treatment. Infections can be caused by bacteria or fungi, and may be the result of parasites migrating through the tissues from ingestion of a mouse or rat containing intermediate host parasite larvae. Some respiratory infections occur as a result of poor husbandry, maintaining a herp at the incorrect temperature or humidity (either too high or too low), malnutrition or heavy parasite load (either external, such as mites, or internal). Certain viruses can also cause respiratory signs.

Specific diagnostics should be performed after a vet has taken a thorough history and performed a physical exam. Unfortunately, any antibiotics given prior to testing can interfere with specific bacterial culture results. That does not mean that you should not take her to a herp vet for evaluation. Even though she is acting better now, the medications given might result in temporary improvement, and not a cure. She likely requires a more potent antibiotic and she may require nebulization therapy or even surgery.

Please make an appointment with a herp vet, and make sure that you bring in the medication that you have been giving her. Respiratory disease in herps should never be shrugged off, and should always be taken seriously. I hope you can get her diagnosed and treated effectively.

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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.