

## Boa and Snake Diet

### Should I feed my snake fish?

*By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP*

I recently acquired a red-tailed boa and was wondering if I can feed it fish. My dad and I thought there was somewhere in our town that we could get mice, but there is no one near us, and he doesn't want to keep mice in our home. I looked into feeding him frozen mice, but my mother absolutely refuses to let me defrost frozen mice in our microwave, let alone keep them in the freezer. I have heard that Anacondas eat fish and other water creatures in the wild, and seeing as the two snakes are closely related, I was hoping that my boa could do the same in captivity. Any suggestions or advice you can give me will be most appreciated.

I am so glad that you wrote to me instead of just trying to feed your new boa only fish.

I know you are not going to want to hear this, but here goes. Was your boa an impulse purchase?

Hopefully, most herp owners thoroughly research the requirements of their new pet prior to acquiring it to ensure that they can adequately meet the new herp's needs. I have the feeling that this didn't happen in the case of your new snake. Your entire family should have been in agreement that boas eat rodents and there had to be some way to make sure that your snake had a constant supply of mice or rats.

While it is true that anacondas are related to boas and are sometimes called "the water boa," anacondas are carnivores, meaning meat-eaters. Anacondas eat pigs, deer, caiman, birds, fish and rodents (such as the capybara and agouti). They do not just consume fish. Young anacondas eat small rodents, such as mice and rats, baby birds, frogs and small fish.

Red-tailed boa youngsters eat mice, small birds, lizards and frogs. As the snake grows, the size of the prey will increase as well. Adults will eat monkeys, capybaras, agoutis, caiman and wild pigs.

It would do your snake a real disservice, not to mention endangering its health, if you only fed it fish. Either your family must come to some agreement about your new pet, or you should look for a pet more suited to your family.

Frozen rodents would seem to be the best solution, but this would entail keeping a supply of frozen rodents in the freezer. Frozen rodents do not need to be defrosted in the microwave, as they can be defrosted by soaking the rodent (in a plastic bag) in warm water until defrosted. Another way to defrost them is by placing the rodent in the refrigerator until it is completely defrosted. However, I have a feeling that your mother won't go for that idea, either.

With any frozen rodents, if they sit out for too long, the rodents may begin to decompose and can develop potentially harmful bacteria that could be dangerous to the snake.

While it was an inventive thought to attempt to feed your new boa nothing but fish, this will not provide your boa with the correct nutrients. That is why snakes feed on a variety of animals and not just one type. Variety is the spice of life, especially when it comes to a herp's diet.

Please show this answer to your parents and sit down with them to try to decide what to do. Perhaps you can look for a small, used freezer that you can use to just store your frozen rodents in. Or perhaps your mother will allow you to keep frozen rodents in your family freezer once she sees that they come in neat little sealed plastic pouches and not in some macabre frozen block of mice! There is no need to defrost them in the microwave oven, so at least that is one less concern for your mother. If you cannot come to some sort of resolution that is safe for your snake, I think you might need to consider finding it a more suitable home and perhaps you can find a pet everyone can agree on. Even though it is your pet, it does impact your family. Check my archived questions to see if you can find a herp more suited to your needs, such as bearded dragons (they eat vegetation, insects, and unfortunately, the occasional pinky mouse once they mature).

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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](http://www.arav.com). Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.