

Getting Young Corn Snakes to Eat

My baby corn snake will not eat pinkies. What should I do?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I have a very young baby corn snake that I bought at a reptile expo. He is very small, and I am concerned as to what I should feed him. The man I purchased him from said to feed him pinkies. I have been unable to get him to eat them. I am also worried because the smallest pinkies I have been able to find seem too big for him. I bought mice to breed feeders and just had newborns this morning; these seem to be too large also. I am very concerned because I want the little guy to be OK. Do you have any suggestions?

There are several things that you can try in order to get your little corn snake to eat. Most hatchling corn snakes, even the smallest babies, can usually manage to eat a newborn pinky mouse. One of my dear friends, Peg, raises hundreds of corn snakes, and she said that she once had twin baby corn snakes hatch from one egg, and these two were able to eat a pinky shortly after hatching.

But, if you don't think your little snake can manage a pinky, you can try several things. First, we must make sure that he is being maintained at the correct temperature. Temperature ranges should be between 77 and 84 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 67 to 75 degrees at night. Humidity should be between 30 and 70 percent relative humidity. Your new snake should have a hidebox, and it is probably best to not handle him often until he is eating well. Make sure he also has a low water bowl so that he can drink and soak. Most breeders won't sell baby snakes until they have eaten at least once, to make sure that they are healthy.

It can be difficult to get some baby corn snakes to start feeding. If you truly don't feel that he can handle eating a newborn pinky mouse, you can try "braining" a pinky. This is kind of gross, but it often works. Cut open the skull of a pinky and squeeze out a bit of the brains out the nose or through the cut, and cut the pinky in half, so that the snake only has to ingest a portion of the pinky. Place this pinky portion into the snake cage. Often once a snake "tastes" the brain tissue by flicking its tongue, it will often consume the pinky portion.

If he won't strike at a pinky, and you still think that a newborn pinky is too large, you can cut the pinky in half, take a piece and use it to aggravate your snake. This is called "tease feeding." Holding your snake or having him in his cage, gently and repeatedly tap your snake on the nose with the pinky part (or an entire pinky) until you get him to strike at the pinky. Once he strikes, you may need to hold him until he has consumed the pinky, or if he is in the cage, just let him eat the pinky. You can try "braining" the pinky first and then tease feed it.

If you think that your snake is really too small to consume an entire newborn pinky (and you would be surprised by how a tiny newly hatched snake can often manage to consume a newborn pinky mouse!), you can try to purchase a baby spiny mouse or baby pygmy mouse. These newborns are much smaller than a regular pinky, making them easier to consume.

Corn snakes usually consume rodents, but you may get an occasional snake that prefers lizards. A baby anole or Cuban anole might entice a reluctant snake to eat. However, wild lizards often carry parasites, so this might introduce parasites to your snake. Parasites can be handled by your herp vet, should this occur. Another way to get a baby snake to eat a pinky is to scent the pinky (or a half pinky) with lizard. First, wash the pinky with dishwashing detergent, and rinse it very well, then dry it off. If you need to half the pinky, do that next. Then, grind up some lizard or skin part of it, and wipe the pinky with the lizard scent, especially around the head, which is usually the first part consumed. This might entice your corn snake to eat.

As a last resort, you can be shown how to use a pinky pump to force-feed your snake, but this should be performed initially by your herp vet, who can then show you how to do it should that be necessary. I would only recommend this as a last resort, when all other methods have been exhausted. Force feeding a hatchling snake can be dangerous and can even prove fatal to a baby snake. Because it is a natural instinct for a baby snake to want to eat, given the correct conditions and prey animal, it is best to find out a way to get your little guy to eat on his own. Make sure you are keeping him warm enough, resist the temptation to handle him until he is eating well, and try some of these suggestions. You should have your little guy eating in no time!

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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.