

Mites On Snake

What is best way to get rid of mites on snakes?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

What is best way to get rid of mites on my son's snake? A pet store owner said to soak the snake in water for a couple of days.

I am so glad that you wrote in and questioned the advice given to you, as soaking a snake for "a couple of days" would result in either a drowned snake and/or a very chilled, water-logged snake that probably still would have mites on its high and dry parts (ie. the head!)

Mites are a common problem in snakes and can be responsible for transmitting bacteria, blood parasites and maybe even viruses, between herps. They drain the liquid portion of the blood (serum) and cause intense discomfort to the snake. They can weaken the snake over time, making it prone to secondary infections, generalized ill health and even death due to severe infestation. Mites can cause dysecdysis (difficulty in shedding) as well.

There are several ways to attempt eradication of mites from snakes. The best way would be to take your snake in to see a herp veterinarian who can prescribe an appropriate medication, based on your snake's precise body weight. In addition to giving your snake a safe and appropriate medication, such as ivermectin, that will kill mites on the snake, you will also need to thoroughly clean and use appropriate insecticide spray or powder in your snake's habitat, or the chance of the mites recurring will be high. Ivermectin cannot be used in indigo snakes, and the rare unusual reaction to ivermectin can occur in other species, so this medication should always be administered by a knowledgeable herp vet.

Sprays containing pyrethroid insecticides are often the most effective way to eradicate mites. However, there is a fine line between effective treatment and an overdose causing toxicosis. There are several commercially available sprays for herps. However, I recommend that you consult a herp vet for the best chance of eradicating the mites safely.

The mites do not lay their eggs on the snake, so the entire cage, inside and out, as well as the area around the cage, must be cleaned with warm, soapy water and then thoroughly rinsed. Mites tend to be found in the cracks and seams of the cage, which is where they are most likely to lay their eggs. Water bowls, rocks, hide boxes, branches and any other cage equipment must also be removed and thoroughly washed and cleaned. Any wooden branches or boxes should probably be tossed out, as the mites can lay eggs in cracks and crevasses. It is possible to bake wood in the oven to kill mites and eggs, but it would be best to discard wooden items to prevent re-infestation. Once the cage and equipment are clean and dry, you can spray thoroughly with a dilute pyrethroid spray, then allow everything to air dry again. Use newspaper or paper towels in the bottom of the cage for the time being.

Next, the snake can be sprayed with a herp-safe mite spray. You must gently wipe the spray around the eyes and labial pits (if present), being careful to avoid getting the liquid in the mouth. Blot off excess spray and then put the snake back into its cleaned and de-mited cage. Make sure the cage is well-aired out, as the fumes can be quite toxic to the snake.

Do not put a water bowl in the cage for a few days so the snake can't wash off the mite spray. The snake will need to be treated at least three times, every two weeks. Don't treat the snake if it is getting ready to shed, instead wait until after the shed.

Another method of eradicating mites from snakes involves the use of 5% Sevin™ dust (carbaryl powder). The snake can be placed in a small container with a thin layer of the powder in the bottom for several hours, which will kill the mites on the snake. It is apparently not dangerous for a snake to inhale a small amount of the dust; however, this should be kept to a minimum by trying to prevent the snake from thrashing around in the powder. Once the dust bath has finished, the snake can be rinsed in a diluted ivermectin spray (this spray should be mixed up at the proper dilution by a herp vet familiar with this protocol). The cage, equipment, bowls and the area around the cage should also be thoroughly cleaned and sprayed with an effective mite spray to prevent re-infestation. Remember that wooden items are difficult to eradicate of mites and their eggs, so it is probably best to discard these items. I recommend that a herp vet supervise this protocol, as well.

Good luck with your son's snake. I hope this helps you with your snake's needs.



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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.