

An Overfed and Choking Snake

How do you remove prey from a choking reptile's throat?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I keep just about every type of animal you can think of from dogs to horses, frogs to snakes, and crabs to scorpions. Some time back I fed all my animals their usual meals and had two small—medium sized rats left over that my red-tailed boas didn't eat. I gave one to my Mozambique spitter and one to my Egyptian cobra (my two largest snakes next to the boas). The Mozambique ate the rat with no problem while the Egyptian cobra left it untouched. I then tossed the second rat in with the Mozambique which was quickly eaten.

A couple of days went by and I noticed my Mozambique spitter contracting her muscles and could see her previously eaten rats being regurgitated back up. This was obviously something no herp keeper wants their animals doing. However, I thought little of it and went back to the house.

About one hour after seeing this I went back up to check on the Mozambique and remove the regurgitated rats. Upon entering I saw the Mozambique laying turned over with its mouth open and its tail twitching, and paralyzed looking. You could tell the snake was having problems breathing and the rats were still about six inches from the snake's mouth (near where I guessed the snake's lung would be). I got the snake out and tried to gently slide the rats the rest of the way out and managed to get them up another inch. The snake laid there with its head in the tube restraint not really trying to escape or bite, and a few minutes later, it was dead.

I know eventually everything will die, however, knowing this snake died because I gave it not one but two prey items that were too large didn't help things much. My question is: are there any non-surgical methods someone could use to help a snake in this situation? I never hope this happens again to me or anyone for that matter; although, I'd like to know what could be done in such an event. Thanks ahead of time.

You sound like my kind of person! I, too, have had horses, dogs, frogs, salamanders, crabs, snakes, tortoises and lizards!

Since you have venomous snakes, for the sake of this answer, I am going to treat this case as if these were "just snakes" and not hot ones. I am not going to get into the whole issue about people keeping venomous snakes. THAT is an entirely different matter, but I do want to discuss your problem.

You have broken one of the golden rules of snake-keeping. It is a bad practice to "re-feed" a prey item that has been rejected by one snake, by offering it to another snake. That is one way to transmit potential disease from one snake to another, even within your own collection. The only situation in which it might be okay to re-feed is if you held a pre-killed prey item with clean tongs and the snake rejected it, but the snake never touched the rodent, and the rodent never touched anything in the cage.

I would prefer that you train your snakes to eat either pre-killed or frozen/thawed rodents instead of live prey. Feeding live prey can be dangerous, and if you do offer live, you must watch the snake the entire time that the rodent is in with it, or you risk terrible damage to your snake from rodent bites. Please review my answer about the ball python, as I discussed feeding dead prey there, as well.

Even with venomous snakes, it is still possible to train them to consume killed prey. However, special precautions must be used when dealing with hot snakes to prevent bites to their caretakers.

Now, on to your specific question about what to do if a snake is overfed (in your case, two prey items that were both too large for the snake). In most cases, I would recommend taking the snake immediately to a herp veterinarian or to an after-hours facility. However, since this was a venomous snake, I doubt that you would find any vet who would examine and treat your spitter. This poses a huge problem. In a non-venomous species, I would sedate and then intubate the snake (pass an appropriate sized endotracheal tube into the windpipe to ensure that it is patent (not blocked) during the procedure ahead). I would then try to lubricate and manipulate the rodents up the esophagus and out the mouth; however, this is a dangerous and potentially life-threatening procedure, which, thankfully, I have never had to perform. I don't know what else you could have done by yourself once you discovered your snake in this condition.

I suppose that the take-home message is this: pay close attention to what and how much you are feeding your snakes,

making sure you offer appropriately sized prey items only. As they taught us in vet school: If you are going to make a mistake, make a different one each time. I'm sure you will never overfeed a snake just to dispatch an extra rodent again. I'm sorry for your loss, but I don't think that there was anything else that you could have done. At least you tried.

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.