

Snake Bacterial Skin Infection

How long do snake bacterial skin infections take to clear up?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I just bought a 3-month-old albino Burmese python today, and he was kind of a rescue because he has a bacterial skin infection. It was clearing up with them using erythromycin (sorry about the spelling). He has not been handled properly and has been in dirty conditions. My questions are: How long do these take to clear up? Do you think there is anything else we should be trying? I can't take him to the vet until payday so I was just curious about your opinions. He doesn't act sick, and they said he was eating pretty well. He gets fed by me tomorrow. He is a little aggressive because of mishandling, but he is OK with me. Thank you very much for your time. P.S. Please email me. Thank you again!

Unfortunately, due to the volume of mail that I receive, I am not able to answer every question personally. But, I thought this question would be of interest to my readers, so here we go.

The antibiotic that you are referring to is called erythromycin, and honestly, it is not a very good antibiotic for most herp infections. It is a very old type of antibiotic that is often sold in pet stores for fish, but it is of limited use in many other species of animals. As a matter of fact, it is so out of vogue in herp medicine that it is not even listed in my most current exotic animal formulary as an antibiotic for use in reptiles. While it may be used as a topical ointment or eye ointment in certain circumstances, it is almost never used by herp veterinarians as a systemic treatment for bacterial infections. Now, you didn't specify how the erythromycin was administered (orally, injectably or topically, which are the three most common ways that antibiotics are given), so I can't really comment much further on this, other than to say that if the erythromycin is being administered orally, then I would recommend finding a herp vet to help you as soon as possible.

If your new snake needs systemic antibiotics, then your herp vet can choose a more appropriate treatment, based on clinical signs, cytology, bacterial culture and sensitivity, blood tests or other tests as deemed necessary. If a pet herp is already on antibiotics, this can interfere with accurate bacterial culture and sensitivity. But, if your snake does require antibiotics, your herp vet can still choose a much better medication than erythromycin.

I'm glad that you will be able to take your snake in to see your herp vet after payday, so this will solve a lot of your problems. Skin infections can be caused by a variety of different problems, many husbandry related (like the dirty conditions that it was kept in prior to your rescue efforts). As to your question about how long the skin infection will take to clear up, it really depends on the severity of the infection, how debilitated the snake is and how well it is being cared for now. Infections in the skin can be a sign of systemic disease, rodent bites, thermal burns, dirty and wet environmental conditions, parasitic problems or trauma, so there are a lot of variables regarding healing.

Hopefully, once your snake has seen your herp vet, you will be able to get a lot of your questions answered by him or her. A good take-home message for my readers is this: Most antibiotics that are available over-the-counter, meaning that they are available without a prescription, are the older generations of antibiotics that have limited use or no place in modern veterinary medicine. The choice of antibiotic therapy should be made based on culture and sensitivity results, whenever possible, or based on sound medical judgment, and then dosed based on the herp's precise weight. Choosing an antibiotic should never be made just because an antibiotic is handy or easy to acquire.

Today, many of the best antibiotic treatments are injectable human antibiotics that will provide the best means of treating most bacterial infections in herps, although in some cases, orally administered antibiotics are also effective.

I hope you can get your many questions answered once you have had your snake examined by your herp vet. Thanks for writing.

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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.