

# Rat Snakes

All genus *Elaphe* (including North American, European and Asian rat snakes)

**CAGING:** The cage should provide enough room for your snake to move around in comfortably and be easy to clean; a 15 or 20 gallon aquarium is good for most rat snakes. Black and white newspaper or paper towels make good bedding as they are economical and easily removed. Reptile Carpets also work very well. The cover of the cage should be very secure, as these snakes are quite good at escaping, and should provide adequate ventilation. An easy to clean, plastic or ceramic hiding box will provide shelter for your snake. Some rat snakes are nervous, and will strike at the glass when you approach, if not given a hiding box.

**WATER:** Fresh water must be available at all times. The water dish should be large enough so that the snake can totally immerse itself.

**TEMPERATURE:** Rat snakes are generally temperate climate animals and do best at temperatures of 75 to 85 degrees F, so some type of heating is needed. This can be provided by a heating pad or a red light bulb in a reflector fitting. (A red light bulb will allow the snake to sleep without having to turn off the heat at night.) The heating pad can be placed under the cage. The light should be placed above the cage so that it shines down into the cage. Place either one so that only one end of the cage is heated, giving your snake a temperature gradient. A thermometer should be kept in the warm end of the cage to assure that you maintain a good temperature.

**FOOD:** Despite their name, rat snakes prefer a diet of mice. Never leave mice old enough to bite in the snake cage, unless you are watching, as they may injure or kill the snake. Many rat snakes are erratic feeders. They will feed ravenously for a few months, and then go 'off their feed' for weeks or months at a time, causing their owners endless distress. If you have such an individual, stay calm, unless significant weight loss occurs. To stimulate feeding after a fast, offer a live weanling mouse in the hiding box; an almost irresistible treat for most rat snakes. Some rat snakes also like baby chicks and warm eggs.

**HEALTH:** Mites are common on these snakes. To eliminate them, place a small piece of "No-Pest" strip in a jar (with several holes in the lid) in the cage, and leave the jar for 2-3 days. Repeat, if necessary, in two weeks. Remove the water dish while the jar is in the cage. Cages must be kept clean to prevent infections, scale rot, and other problems. Anti-bacterial cleaning solutions are recommended. One ounce of bleach in ten ounces of water is one such solution. Rinse the cage with clean water after using any solution. Don't use Lysol, Lestoil or other such oil-based cleaners; they are deadly to reptiles. The cage substrate (bedding) must also be kept dry. Though snakes like to soak in water, they must be able to dry off, or they will develop scale rot and blisters.

**HANDLING:** Most snakes don't object to being handled two or three times a week. Don't handle any snake for 48 hours after feeding, or if it becomes ill or stops feeding, unless the cage needs cleaning. Keep handling to a minimum when your snake is getting ready to shed. The skin can be damaged easily during this time.

This Care Sheet was originally written by New England Herpetological Society. It can be found at [www.neherp.com](http://www.neherp.com) or [www.AnimalCityInc.com](http://www.AnimalCityInc.com)



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