

# Corn Snake

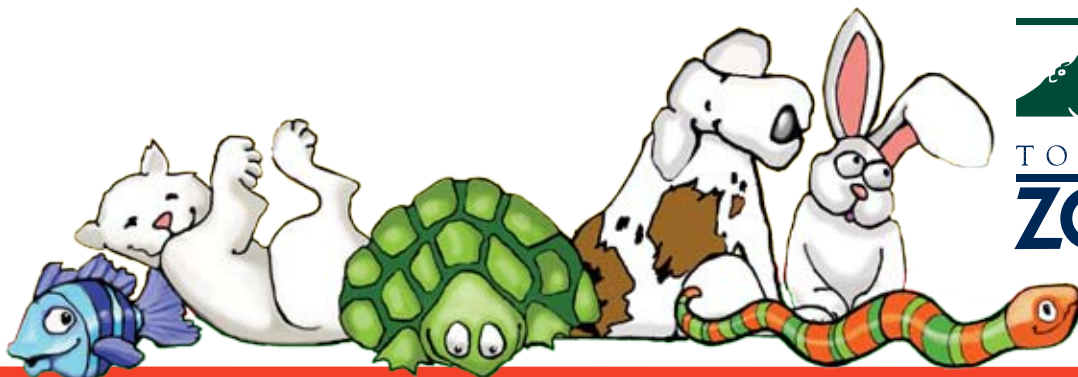
(*Elaphe guttata*)



Before deciding if a corn snake is the right animal for you ask yourself the following questions.

- Have you researched this animal and do you have the time, money and knowledge to provide proper care for the animal's entire lifespan?
- Do you have the appropriate location and space for this animal?
- Is this animal legal to keep as a pet in your area?
- Is there a mature person in the household to provide primary care of the animal?
- Do you have a vet in your area that is able to provide appropriate medical care to this specific animal?

If you have answered yes to these questions or need some extra help, then let Toledo Zoo give you some great information on your animal of choice. Although this animal may be right for you, please read below and discover some of the important needs of this animal.



# Corn Snake

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## Basics

### Short, tall or grande?

If you are looking for a reptile, a corn snake may be a wonderful choice—it's one of the most popular snakes for pet owners. These mid-size snakes are less than one foot long when hatched and can grow to about five feet long. A healthy corn snake has a muscular body that it can use to constrict, or wrap, around its food. However, they are not heavy snakes and weigh about 700-900 grams (1.5 to 2 lbs.) as adults.

These reptiles will have bright shiny eyes and be responsive of movement around its surroundings and body. Their bodies are covered in many smooth scales and will be very smooth to the touch from head to tail.

A corn snake is normally a combination of many colors in the wild. The most common colors are patterns of brown, red, orange and black with a lighter colored belly. Over many generations of snakes in human care, breeders have introduced a wide variety of new color combinations using selective breeding. Now it is common to see corn snakes in colors, from all-white to red stripes!

### How long is that in snake years???

Corn snakes can live 20 years or more under human care! This is longer than most cats and dogs, so make sure you imagine where you and your new snake may be in the future.

### Personalities are not just for people.

While corn snakes don't think or feel like people, it is good to know about how their behavior will fit into your life.

Corn snakes, like most reptiles, are not eager to spend time curling up next to their owners. In fact, these snakes are solitary animals and spend most of their day hiding. A snake's needs are met with a safe and comfortable place to stay and a regular supply of food and water. If you are looking for an animal to spend time playing games and interacting with you, then a snake may not be the best choice. However, for a chance to observe the life of a beautiful and unique animal, corn snakes are a great choice.

If you plan on holding your corn snake, it is good to find a snake that is both healthy and not fearful of being touched. To start with a calm animal will help insure a calm animal later in its life.



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## What do I need to survive?

### Stop... Dinner time!

First start with a bowl of water. Use fresh tap water every day in a bowl just big enough for your snake to slither into. Your corn snake will spend most of its time on dry land, but every now and then a dip in the water dish is a good thing.

Vegetarians may have a hard time keeping a corn snake since they are carnivorous or only eat meat. When these snakes are young they will eat pinky mice (1-2 day old, furless mice) about twice a week. As they grow, larger mice can be fed and corn snake adults will eat full size mice once a week. Never feed a snake directly from your hands; always use tongs to offer their food. Choosing a food that is no wider than the widest portion of your animal will ensure they can swallow and digest their meal. Don't worry if their mouth looks a little small; corn snakes can actually unhinge their jaws to stretch around their food! Remove any food they don't eat after a day.

Feeder mice are usually sold frozen and then thawed out a few at a time. Be careful to never feed a frozen mouse to a snake; it could cause harm or food regurgitation. Before bringing a corn snake home, make sure you can get a varied supply of mice from your pet store or through the mail. You may also want to ask your family if keeping frozen mice in the fridge is OK with them.

### A healthy pet is a happy pet.

While most veterinarians are wonderful with cats and dogs, you may have to look around for someone with the right snake experience. Making calls to your area vets and asking about their reptile and snake clients will let you find the right place to go if there is a problem.

While many people may go many years without a vet visit for their snake, always look for signs that your pet may be ill. If any of the below symptoms arise, then scheduling an appointment with an experienced veterinarian is advised.

- Tiny insects covering your animals body
- Redness, swelling and irritation on your snakes body
- No food/water consumption

### Beauty School

Snakes don't need brushing or soapy baths. Snakes simply make new "skin" when they need it! This is called shedding, and it's a very interesting part of owning a snake. Several times a year your pet will leave behind its old scales and grow into larger, cleaner scales. A healthy snake should shed its scales in a long piece that looks like a tube.

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## Could I have some space please?

While a corn snake cage at a pet store may look simple, they need the correct heat, space, and humidity to maintain good health.

First the space, usually a glass aquarium or special reptile box, needs to be about 20 gallons for an adult and could be slightly larger. It is very important that the space is closed with a tightly locking lid because corn snakes can escape through very tiny openings. Place newspaper or butcher paper along the bottom of the cage to add a removable/cleanable bottom. Some people use specially bought reptile bark or mulch. This may look nicer, but is more expensive and it not a necessity.

Now it is time to add some hiding space and things to climb around. A "hide box" is important to keep your corn snake feeling safe. These can be made from cardboard or specially bought from a pet store and made of plastic or wood. Make sure there are a couple of places for you snake to hide on both the warm and cool side of the tank during the day or any time it feels stressed or scared. Adding rocks and pieces of wood is important too. Being able to crawl on and around these objects help your pet start shedding and make the space more interesting. It will also make your snake's home look more natural for your enjoyment. Take the whole cage and find an area of your house without too much direct sun light to set up.

Adding a heat source is very important for a snake's health. Pad heaters or lights keep the temperature correct and provide "hot spots." Since snakes can not make their own body heat like us, they need to absorb it from around them. Using a large, flat heating pad is a great option and can be placed underneath your cage. Don't use hot rock type heaters as they can over heat one space and leave the rest too cold. A pad heater made for reptiles that can keep a range of heat in the tank from 65-90° F is best. Heat lights may work too, but always check many spots for temperature. A space that is too hot or too cold can harm your animal. Placing a thermometer in your tank will ensure a good heat range of about 80-85° F.

Humidity, or the moisture in the air, is important too. Since a snake relies on moisture to shed properly, keeping a minimum humidity of about 30% will prevent health problems. A device called a hygrometer will monitor this and can be found combined with thermometers at your local pet store. There are many ways to raise and control humidity, from large humidifiers for your whole house to making a small container with wet peat moss for a snake to hide in. If your snake's area is too dry, find a way to control humidity that works best for you.

Finally, cleaning should include a water change every day and spot cleaning for any snake messes. Special cleaning products, like Nolvasan or special reptile cleaners, are perfect for cleaning tanks as they only need to be wiped dry to do their job. Once a month or so a total clean of the tank will keep things sanitary and odor-free.

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## How am i going to affect you?

### How much is that reptile in the window? Hiss! Hiss!

It can be surprising how expensive a pet can be, and a corn snake is no exception. First, plan on spending about \$30 on a corn snake if you cannot adopt one. The tank, heating and "furniture" can cost around \$100. Frozen rodents can cost about 50¢ apiece and will be a lifetime cost. Also, remember a surprise vet visit could set you back a lot of money.

When looking for a place to purchase a pet, it is always smart to look at local wildlife rescues and shelters. Animals in pet stores come from many different sources and conditions. Always carefully look over your animals to ensure a healthy animal from the start. If your pet store isn't taking proper care of their animals, finding different resources for your animal and supplies is always the best option.

### Risks and benefits to owning your animal.

#### Risks:

Due to the risk of Salmonella bacteria, all reptiles should be avoided by children under the age of 5 years or any individual with a weakened immune system including the elderly and also pregnant women. Anyone handling a reptile should wash their hands after contact to prevent the possibility of disease. Beyond these risks, corn snakes are relatively docile and offer little danger. However, anything with a mouth can bite. It is rare for a corn snake to bite, but a handler should be cautious especially if signs of stress are evident (twitching, struggling and hissing) or if feeding has recently occurred. Slow and steady movements around your corn snake and avoiding feeding days by 24 hours will keep your snake calm and tractable.

When placing a snake in your house, think about all the surroundings that could stress your new pet or perhaps frighten an animal you already have. For example, never place a pet snake next to a pet hamster, and don't allow a cat or dog to stand over your new pet all day long. Placing a cage right on top of a vibrating washing machine or in front of a loud stereo could be a problem too. Keep your surroundings in mind to prevent stress for all your animals.

#### Benefits:

In exchange for your care, corn snakes' interesting behaviors can teach wonderful lessons about nature and life. They can be a beautiful way to add nature and wildlife inside your home. Also, countless studies have shown that pet care and ownership lowers anxiety, stress levels and can even lower blood pressure! Some people even believe pets can lead to longer life!

### Laws... Who let the snakes out?

There are a few laws that are very important for snake owners to understand. First, it is illegal in Ohio to release corn snakes into the wild. This means that if you have a pet snake and can no longer take care of it, you must find it another good home. Placing them back into the wild is dangerous for other wildlife and the snake! Other laws limit the number of animals people can remove from the wild. It is never a good idea to capture a wild animal for use as a pet. This can disrupt or harm the environment. Every state has different rules and regulations and it is important to know the laws for your animals.

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## Out "together" time

### Time flies when you are having fun with your new pet!

Occasional handling and showing your new pet to friends can be fun and exciting. Also, watching your corn snake eat mice or shed its skin is fascinating and educational. Enjoy watching and interacting with your animal, but always pay close attention!

### Snake boot camp and training with treats.

Corn snakes are not known for flashy tricks, but try feeding with special tongs (used for feeding only) and get your snake to accept food from you. After some time your snake may accept food right off the feeding tongs. Be sure to keep your hands away from food at all times to prevent confusion.

About 24 hours after food has left your snake's cage, you can train your snake to be handled. Before you handle your pet, be sure to wash your hands first so that you do not smell like food to the snake. When approaching your pet snake, move slowly and steadily. Touch the snake's midsection and let it know you are there. When holding your pet, make sure to allow the snake to move some by keeping your fingers loose; do not grip the snake tightly. When touching your snake, always stroke in the direction of the scales (i.e. from head toward the tail). Bending a snake scale backwards is like bending our finger nails backwards—very painful. Most snakes do not like to be touched near their head or tail, so take care to avoid these areas. After some time your animal will get more and more comfortable with your handling. In time, handling will be a stress-free breeze for both you and your animal.

### Keep 'em busy (and out of trouble)!

Corn snakes don't require a lot of extra attention, and don't need new toys or things very often. It may be fun for you to rearrange the cage after monthly cleanings to make a new space for your pet. Simply follow the basics above and your snake will stay out of trouble and give you a wonderful look into nature!



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Excellent! You have read over the basics of corn snake pet ownership and care.

If you have determined that this type of pet is not the one for you, you may wish to consider volunteering at The Toledo Zoo, your local humane society/animal shelter, vet, animal rehabilitation facility or other animal caretaking establishment in order to interact with animals and learn more about which ones could make a good pet for you.

### Learn More About Corn Snakes

At your local library:

Corn Snakes and Other Rat Snakes, by R.D. Bartlett and Patricia P. Bartlett

- An illustrated adult level book lots of corn snake information

Snakes, by Selina Wood

- A fully illustrated kids' book about choosing a pet snake

On the web:

<http://www.kingsnake.com/>

- A wonderful forum of information for all types of reptiles

<http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/index.html>

- Excellent source of animal information of all kinds

