

How Do I Treat Snakes For Mites?

Although commonly found on wild snakes, external parasites such as mites and ticks should not be found on snakes kept as pets in captivity. In the wild, external parasites feed off of the blood of snakes and reptiles. Fortunately, these mites and ticks lay their eggs off of their reptile host and upon hatching, the host is generally long gone. In captivity, the eggs would be laid someplace inside the terrarium and when the eggs hatch they have their meal well within range. Next thing you know, your pet is covered in several generations of parasites and is in dire need of your help.

About Mites;

The “snake mite” *Ophionyssus natricis*, primarily feeds on snakes, but can, if necessary feed on any reptile, mammal or human – however, it is doubtful they can complete their life cycle on these alternate hosts.

Snake mites can be seen with the naked eye. Their size and colour (translucent, white, red, black and brown) depends on which stage of their life cycle they are in and if they have recently been feeding.

Snake mites can transmit diseases from snake to snake. Bacterial, protozoan, viral, and filarial pathogens.

Adult male and female mites are lively, crawling insects, actively seeking a blood meal. Often the mites will not be seen until they have fed. Whether they feed or not, the adults live for up to 40 days. The males copulate with several females before and after feeding, and within 5-8 days of eating, the females will lay eggs. Only fed females will lay eggs, but breeding is not essential for the eggs to hatch. A female mite can lay up to 80 eggs in her limited lifespan. A fed female that was bred will lay about 20 eggs, and these fertilized eggs will all hatch into females, dependent on temperature and relative humidity, in about 40-56 hours at 77F and greater than 50% relative humidity. The fed females that were not bred will also lay about 20 eggs, and these unfertilized eggs will (through parthenogenesis) develop into males. The larvae that result from all eggs are small, white and non-feeding. They live off the reptile and are very susceptible to drying.

After 18-24 hours, the larvae develop into the protonymph, which is an active, aggressive, and feeding stage. Once the protonymph has obtained a blood meal, it will transform into a deutonymph in 3-7 days. The protonymph can endure starvation for up to 31 days but is very susceptible to environmental conditions. The deutonymph will develop into the adult within 24 hours.

Where Did They Come From?

Chances are, your snake picked up mites in one or more of the following ways;

- It had them at the time of purchase or acquisition of the animal
- It was brought into the cage from a piece of wood or bark collected from outside
- Mulches, bark chips or substrates from an unaccredited company (repackaged garden store mulches)
- It was transferred off of a food item you bought (live mice, rats)
- You allowed your pet to roam freely in the yard

How Do I Detect Them?

- Look closely at your hands for “wandering freckles” after handling a snake
- Look closely in the water dishes for drowned mites
- Closely inspect your snakes body and behavior (look for snakes spending excessive amounts of time soaking in their water bowls)

How Do I Get Rid Of Them?

There are many ways and methods used to treat mites. Here is a tried and proven method:

Day #1

- Remove the snake and rinse your pet in warm water. Put it in an escape free, ventilated plastic container and spray the snake down thoroughly with a recommended mite spray
- Remove and dispose of all mulches, barks, substrates and decorations (like tree branches or grapevine)
- Bleach your tank thoroughly using a 10% solution (bleach/water)
- Bleach all hiding caves and water dishes and the lid
- Rinse everything thoroughly.
- Spray down the tank walls and floor with mite spray and let it dry
- Reset the tank using newspaper on the bottom, and a hiding cave (no water dish at this time)
- Return your “mite sprayed” snake.

Day #2

- Rinse off your snake with warm water and return it to its cage
- Provide a water bowl (it is important to rinse off your snake before providing it water so that the snake doesn't soak in the dish and then drink the “toxed out” water from the spray it had on its body)

Repeat Steps #1 & #2 for the next 10 days (each step 5 times)

After you have completed the 10 day treatment, keep your snake set up simply with newspaper, a hiding spot and a water dish for the next 2 weeks. If no more mites are detected after this time period it should be safe to return your snake to a proper naturalistic set-up. If more mites are detected, repeat the 10 day treatment again.

Remember to wash down all countertops, stands or dressers that your snake cage may be resting on. If you have more than 1 snake cage, you will need to treat all of your snakes, as mites can easily travel from cage to cage.