Reptile

Information Pack

Reptiles are not domesticated animals like cats or dogs, so they have the same needs as their wild relatives. Before deciding to get a reptile, do plenty of research as caring for them can be difficult. Reptiles often end up in rescue centres so you could visit your local centre to see if there are any available.

Under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, pet owners are legally obliged to care for their pets by meeting their **five basic welfare needs**:

- suitable environment
- suitable diet
- ability to behave normally
- appropriate companionship
- be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

This pack provides information on how to meet these needs, and where to go for support if needed. Information is provided on how to care for snakes and bearded dragons.

Snakes

1. Environment - creating the ideal home for your snake

You must provide your snake with an enclosure called a vivarium. It must be secure to prevent escape and free from hazards that might cause injury to your snake.

Size

When purchasing a vivarium for your reptile make sure you consider how large your snake is likely to grow. If you have a young or small snake, they should have an appropriately sized enclosure then increasingly larger ones as they grow, or you can provide plenty of small, confined spaces within a larger vivarium. Snakes need a vivarium big enough to allow them to fully stretch out along its length.

The general rule is allow **at least a third of the snake's length for the depth and height.** For example, a 120cm long snake will need an enclosure that's at least 120cm long, 40cm deep and 40cm tall.

Temperature

Reptiles are ectothermic, meaning they use their environment to warm up and cool down, so you need to create a thermogradient. This means positioning a heat source at one end of the vivarium and leaving the opposite end cool, so the snake can move around to regulate their own temperature.

Humidity

Your snake needs correct levels of humidity to keep their respiratory system healthy and for skin shedding. Use a hygrometer to measure the humidity at the cool end of the vivarium, and mist the vivarium with clean water if you need to boost humidity. If the humidity is constantly too high, your vivarium will need more ventilation to prevent build-up of bacteria and mould.

Light

Snakes use natural daylight to set their day and night patterns. Create a photogradient, from light to shade, by grouping your light with the heat source. The cool end should be more shaded, just as in the wild. Fit a reptile UVB tube into the roof of the vivarium as far into the hot end as possible. Use a reflector of the correct length to direct the light onto your snake.

The lamp must also be replaced according to the manufacturer's instructions and always be guarded to prevent burns or injuries should the bulb shatter.

Make sure you turn off all lights at night. Both your lights and heat lamp can be controlled using a simple plug-in timer – 12 hours on during the day and 12 hours off at night.

Cleaning

Animal waste should be spot cleaned as soon as it appears. Once a month, use a reptile-safe disinfectant (available from pet shops) to fully clean the vivarium walls, glass and decorations, then rinse off well. Wash your hands before and after handling your snake or their equipment, to reduce the spread of infection between you and the snake, as reptiles can carry salmonella.

For **more information** on how to create the ideal environment for your snake species, see the following resources – corn snake, royal python, kingsnake and garter snake.

2. Diet - providing a suitable diet for your snake

Food

What food you feed your snake will depend on what species you have. For most snakes feed a diet of frozen then thawed rodents, available from pet shops. Feeding other prey – such as quails – once a month or so increases variation in their diet.

Young snakes typically feed every five or six days and move up sizes as they grow. They should be fed less often when they're an adult – around every seven to 14 days, depending on the weight of the animal and species.

Regular weighing is important to ensure that your snake doesn't become underweight or obese. As a rule, offer prey that is slightly wider than the widest part of the snake's body. Feed your snake inside their vivarium, using tongs to offer the prey.

Snakes shouldn't need supplements for their diets, as long as they're fed good quality prey.

Water

All snakes should be provided with a dish filled with clean, fresh water at the cool end of the vivarium, and replace it at least daily. It should be large enough to allow the snake to bathe. Sometimes the snake will foul the water, in which case change it as quickly as possible.

3. Behaviour - ensuring your snake is able to behave normally

It's important to provide opportunities for natural behaviour, choice and control for your snake. This is called enrichment.

Enrichment

Snakes are active and will climb if given the opportunity, so provide sturdy branches or peg boards for this (sterilise natural branches with boiling water first).

Snakes will typically hide in small spaces such as animal burrows in the wild. **Include at least two hides**, one at either end of the vivarium, so that the snake can choose the temperature. Provide a choice of hiding places at and above ground level, for example securely hanging from branches. Hides must be large enough for the snake to fit inside, but not so large that their body doesn't touch the sides when coiled up. A third hide containing moistened moss, called a 'humid hide', can provide variation in humidity within the vivarium.

Substrate

Substrate is the floor covering of the vivarium. It's important as it provides something for your snake to burrow under, which will help your snake to feel more secure. Organic soils made for reptiles hold humidity well without going mouldy. If mould starts forming even on this substrate, then your humidity may be too high and your ventilation is not good enough. Natural leaves can be used to provide cover, create a more naturalistic environment and also hold humidity. Sterilise leaves with boiling water and allow them to dry before use. It's not recommended to use sand on its own as it may irritate their skin.

4. Companionship - making sure your snake has appropriate company

It depends on which species of snake you have whether they should be kept alone or with another snake. Most snakes should be kept on their own because they lead a solitary life in the wild. However, garter snakes can be kept in small groups as they live together in the wild.

Handling

Snakes can become used to regular handling but never grab them – it can cause stress which can lead the snake to struggle or bite. Gently scoop up the snake with one hand underneath near the head and the other nearer the tail, supporting the whole animal.

Important handling tips:

- Don't remove the snake from the vivarium for so long that their core temperature drops – around 10 to 15 minutes at a time is usually safe, depending on the room temperature.
- Keep other pets separate when handling your snake.
- Wait 48 hours after feeding before handling your snake to avoid them bringing up their food.
- Avoid handling during shedding as your snake may be defensive, and after handling prey as the snake may smell food and try to bite.

5. Health - making sure your snake is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

- Healthy snakes flick their tongue frequently and have clear, bright eyes. Before you bring your reptile home, ensure that there is a veterinary surgery nearby who will treat them if they become unwell. Choose a suitable sized carrier for your snake for transport, keep transit time to a minimum and avoid extremes of temperatures.

- Look for signs of weight loss or diarrhoea as these can be signs of internal parasites. Constipation could be a sign that the snake is poorly hydrated or that the basking temperature is too low for proper digestion.

- Snakes can also suffer from mouth rot, an infection of the mouth that can have many causes.

- External parasites, such as mites, lodge underneath the scales and drink blood. If your snake is spending long periods of time in the water, or if you notice small black specks on your snake or around the water bowl it could indicate mites. Mites can also spread disease, so they're a serious concern.

- It's essential that you take time to research the diseases of snakes, and to monitor your pet's health daily. See your reptile vet urgently if you have any concerns.

Shedding

Reptiles have to shed their skin regularly and snakes shed in one complete piece. There's no rule as to how often this will happen, but it will be more frequent when the snake is young and growing. The snake may hide away for a period of time and use their humid hide. Then they'll rub their body against objects in the vivarium to remove the old skin, which should come away easily.

If you notice that your snake still has shed over their eyes even after a shed, then these 'eye caps' will need removing as soon as possible. A reptile specialist vet can show you how to do this safely.

If the snake hasn't shed completely, try bathing them in slightly warm water – but don't try to pull it off as you can damage the new skin underneath. If your snake often has issues with shedding, this can usually be improved with simple adjustments to the vivarium's conditions.

Brumation

Brumation is a natural energy saving process seen in some snakes during cooler months – a bit like hibernation – triggered by the reduction in natural daylight hours and air pressure. They may reduce the amount that they eat during this time but not lose weight, so monitor your snake carefully.

Lizards

Lizards can live more than **20 years** depending on the species, and have complex needs so you must be sure that you're able to provide the correct care and associated costs for the animal's whole life. This information will focus on bearded dragons.

RSPCA have information on how to care for many species, including leopard geckos, crested geckos and blue-tongue skink.

Bearded dragons

1. Environment - creating the ideal home for your bearded dragon

Bearded dragons can grow to around 45cm including their tail, so they need enough space to roam around. A **120cm long x 60cm high x 60 cm wide vivarium is the minimum size** you'll need for one adult dragon. The vivarium must be ventilated well, secure to prevent escape and free from hazards that might cause injuries.

Temperature

Reptiles are ectothermic meaning they use their environment to warm up and cool down. To keep your bearded dragon healthy, you need to create a thermogradient in the vivarium: a hotter (38–42°C) bright end, heated with a 60–100 watt light bulb, to a cooler (22–26°C) shaded end. Place a natural stone in the hot end to provide access to the heat. The bulb needs to be fitted with a wire mesh guard, to make sure it can't burn your pet. Make sure you use a thermostat to regulate the temperature but use an infrared thermometer to record the temperatures at both ends daily as well.

Position the vivarium away from other heat sources (like a radiator or bright window) that could affect the temperature. The temperature should not drop below 20–22°C at night, so you may need to use a ceramic heater (non-light-emitting) to maintain the air temperature.

Humidity

Bearded dragons need low humidity to prevent skin or breathing problems. Buy a hygrometer to measure the humidity at the cool end, which should normally be around 30–40 percent. If it's too high, your vivarium will need more ventilation.

Light

Reptiles use natural daylight to set their day and night patterns. UVB light does not pass through glass windows so you should place a reptile UVB lamp inside the vivarium.

Create a photogradient, from light to shade, by positioning your light source close to the basking zone. Fit a high output, 10-12% reptile UVB tube into the roof of the vivarium as far into the hot end as possible. Use a reflector of the correct length to direct the light onto your beardie.

UV lamps must always be guarded to prevent burns, or injuries if the bulb shatters. The UV output will drop over time, so check the light levels regularly, and replace the lamp when the manufacturer recommends. Turn off all lights at night – you can use a simple plug-in timer to set 12 hours on during the day and 12 hours off at night.

Cleaning

It's important to keep your vivarium clean. Otherwise, it can pose a health risk to your pet and to you. Reptiles can carry salmonella, so wash your hands before and after cleaning or handling to reduce the risk of infection.

Animal waste should be spot cleaned as soon as it appears. Clean the vivarium once a month with a reptile-safe disinfectant, then rinse off well.

2. Diet - providing a suitable diet for your bearded dragon

Food

Bearded dragons are **omnivorous**, meaning they eat both live invertebrates and plants and vegetables. Safe greens include watercress, rocket, chicory, cress and grated butternut squash, as well as wild plants – dandelion, clover and plantain leaves. Research other safe plants and vegetables to provide as much variety of those as possible. Avoid feeding spinach as this prevents calcium absorption, and too much cabbage or kale as these can affect hormone production. Remove uneaten items every day and replace with fresh plants and vegetables.

Feed a variety of live invertebrates such as crickets, locusts and calciworms, no bigger than the size of the dragon's mouth. These need to be 'gut-loaded' with a special formulated diet that has extra vitamins and minerals before they're fed to the bearded dragon. The invertebrates should also be dusted lightly with vitamin and mineral supplement powders, which helps pass important nutrients on to your dragon.

Young dragons need more livefood than adults, so give them about 65% livefood, 35% greens, increasing the amount of greens as they grow. Baby dragons should be fed twice daily, with the greens chopped up small. Juveniles should be fed daily and adults should be fed daily greens plus livefood every other day. It's a good idea to weigh your dragon regularly.

Water

Water is essential for a reptile's health and wellbeing, so make sure you provide a shallow dish of clean, fresh water at all times in the cool end. This must be cleaned and replaced at least daily – and immediately if it's soiled.

3. Behaviour - ensuring your bearded dragon is able to behave normally

Enrichment

It's important to provide opportunities for natural behaviour in captivity. Provide stones and branches for climbing, and a hide at both ends of the vivarium so the bearded dragon can feel secure. In the cool end, a box such as a plastic tub with an entrance cut in the top and filled with a sand/soil mixture provides opportunities for digging.

Substrate

Substrate is the name for the floor covering in your vivarium. It's important as it provides something for your lizard to grip onto and can **encourage natural behaviours such as digging** and stops mess from spreading.

With healthy adult dragons, sand substrate or a sand/soil mixture can be used. Always use reptile-safe sand such as clean children's play sand rather than builders' sand which has sharp edges. You could also use stone tiles with rough surfaces or pieces of natural slate, with a product like reptile carpet underneath to make cleaning easier. However, these non-loose substrates prevent the dragon performing natural digging behaviours, so if you use slate tiles as the main substrate also provide a digging box, as above.

Do not use 'calci-sand' or loose substrates with large pieces such as bark and wood chips, crushed walnut or corn cob granules.

4. Companionship - making sure your bearded dragon has appropriate company

Bearded dragons are a territorial species and males lead a solitary life in the wild. Females maintain a 'pecking order' and if kept in groups in captivity they may fight. Sometimes dragons bite off others' toes and tails and smaller animals may even be killed, so it's best to **house bearded dragons separately**.

Handling

Handling your bearded dragon often makes it easier to check for health issues. Never surprise or grab your lizard as this can cause stress. Gently scoop them up with both hands so all four legs are supported. If your dragon backs away from you when you try to pick them up or threatens to bite, it is better to leave them alone and wait for another time.

Your bearded dragon shouldn't be taken from the vivarium for so long that its core temperature drops. Around 10 to 15 minutes at a time is generally safe. Keep other pets separate. If contained safely, such as in a secure pen, the bearded dragon can be taken outdoors on bright summer days for some natural UV and enrichment. In this case, ensure that your beardie also has access to shade and supervise them constantly.

5. Health - making sure your bearded dragon is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Clear, bright eyes are one of the signs of a healthy bearded dragon. A well-fed bearded dragon will have a thick base to its tail and the hips will not be protruding.

Shedding

Bearded dragons shed their skin in large pieces. There is no rule as to how often this will happen, but young bearded dragons will shed skin more frequently. When ready to shed, your dragon may look dull as the old skin becomes dry, then the skin should come off easily over a day or so. Don't pull off old skin if it seems stuck as it can tear the new skin underneath. If patches still remain after a shed, try bathing the dragon in shallow, tepid water for about five minutes to soften it.

Poor shedding on the feet can cut off the blood supply and lead to the loss of toes. However, if your dragon is well hydrated this should not be an issue. Most shedding issues can be corrected by adjusting hydration and humidity. As long as it doesn't create high humidity throughout the vivarium, lightly spray the digging box to provide an area of humidity. Always ask the advice of a specialist reptile vet if you have any problems.

Brumation

During cooler seasons, it's normal for bearded dragons to slow down, sleep more and eat less. It's a bit like hibernation, but for lizards, it's called brumation. They shouldn't lose weight or stop eating entirely, so keep a close eye on them and get in touch with your vet if they're losing weight.

One of the most common problems for pet reptiles is metabolic bone disease (MBD). This is a term used to describe a range of nutritional diseases. It’s most often caused by a lack of UVB lighting, resulting in a vitamin D3 deficiency that prevents the reptile from absorbing calcium from their food, causing muscle weakness and softening of their bones.

Diseases and concerns

Look for signs of abnormal droppings, including constipation or diarrhoea coupled with weight loss, which can be due to internal parasites. If you have any concerns, have your vet run a parasite test on a fresh sample of droppings.

It’s quite common for female dragons to develop eggs even if they’ve never been with a male. This isn’t a problem if she’s offered a digging box in which to lay her eggs but without this she may become ‘egg bound’ – a serious condition. Remove any eggs you find and freeze them before disposal if there’s a possibility they’re fertile.

If you do get a bearded dragon, monitor its health and behaviour daily and see your reptile vet if you have any of the above concerns. If you need to transport your bearded dragon, for example to the vet, it’s important to do so safely. Choose a suitable sized carrier; young lizards such as hatchlings can be transported in ventilated plastic containers with soft, absorbent paper. Adults can be transported in a well-ventilated plastic tub to prevent injury. This should be kept warm; the addition of a heat pack may be necessary but make sure it doesn’t overheat the carrier. Keep transit time to a minimum to reduce stress. For more information on how to look after your bearded dragon please visit here.

This guidance is provided for information purposes only and it should not be relied on as formal advice for your specific circumstances. Dogs Trust accepts no liability for any loss or damage caused as a result of your reliance on it.

Support
for reptile owners

- Your vet practice may offer monthly or yearly care plans to spread the cost of essential pet care.

- **Scottish SPCA** have cost of living advice for exotics here.

- **Blue Cross** run a Pet Loss Support service so that no one has to face the pain of losing a pet alone. The service is free and confidential and can be accessed via emailing plsmail@bluecross.org.uk or calling 0800 096 6606. You can find more information here.

- It is wise to have a plan should you ever become unable to care for your reptile, a family/friend might be able to help. Pet Fostering Service Scotland is a service available if you are unable to look after your pet through illness, homelessness or domestic abuse and cannot arrange any alternative care. Please phone 0344 811 9909 to access the service or email fosterenquiry@pfss.org.uk to arrange a call back.