



# Kingsnake and Milk Snake Care

A comprehensive guide on caring for your kingsnake or milk snake

## Enclosure

Kingsnakes and milk snakes typically grow to adult size of 3 to 7 feet and therefore require an enclosure that is at least 20 gallons or a tub up to 52 quarts, large enough to provide a thermal gradient. Anything larger than this is welcome as long as it includes an appropriate hide. Hatchlings should be housed in smaller



tubs or tanks. A variety of substrates are suitable for these snakes: sterilized reptile bark, aspen bedding, paper towels, newspaper, Astroturf, and cut-to-fit liners. For some desert species, sand (such as Zoo Med Reptisand) could be used as a more naturalistic substrate. If you do use any loose substrate, be sure not to feed on it. Instead, feed your snake in a separate container. **Always avoid non kiln dried pine and cedar bedding as those substrates are damaging to a snake's health.**

It is important to provide décor that creates a hiding spot for the snake. A wide selection of materials can be utilized as a snake hide: shoebox, (non-transparent) plastic storage container, terracotta plant pots, and premade hides found in any pet store are some excellent options. We recommend providing two hides on opposite ends of the enclosure for refuge in the heated portion and away from it.

## Heating and Light

Creating a thermal gradient is crucial when housing a kingsnake or milksnake. The goal when heating the enclosure is to create a temperature gradient with a cool side of around 70-75°F and a hot/basking side around 75-80°F. To achieve these temperatures a ceramic heat emitter or under-tank heat mat is recommended. Heat tape can be placed in the back of rack systems. Basking lights are an option, but should be used with caution as they may overheat the

enclosure. If you are interested in using a heat mat, you must also use a temperature regulator (thermostat). Pet stores will try to sell you a heat mat only – this can heat the glass in the tank too hot and even crack it! Thus, a temperature regulator is used to set the temperature of the heat mat. It has a probe that you place over the hot spot (under the hot hide) and will turn off the heat mat when the temperature reaches that maximum set level. UV bulbs can be used on display tanks but are not necessary.

We do **not** recommend heat rocks to fulfill kingsnake and milk snake heating requirements. Heat rocks often have "hot spots" and can overheat quickly, possibly causing severe thermal burns. If a reptile is housed in an enclosure that is cold everywhere except one heat rock, it will spend most of its time curled around it, and in direct contact with an unstable heat source. This can cause severe burns and damage to the snake.

## **Humidity**

Some snakes may require a more humid environment to aid with shedding. The water bowl provided to your snake should be large enough to allow for soaking, while not overflowing water into the enclosure. If your snake is having difficulty shedding even with a water bowl, you may try misting the enclosure lightly for a few days to increase humidity until the snake sheds. Also, a humidity box can be put in, and left in the enclosure for the snake to use whenever it needs to. Humidity boxes can be easily and cheaply constructed out of plastic container large enough to house a loosely coiled snake. An access hole must be cut in the side, but otherwise the box should remain closed. A layer of moist moss such as sphagnum or peat should be put inside the humidity box and kept moist at all times. Moist paper towels work as well and are easier to replace but tend to dry out more quickly. With baby snakes, a deli cup can be used to make a humidity box.

## **Co-Habitation**

Kingsnakes and milk snakes, specifically kingsnakes, will often eat other snakes of the same size if given the opportunity. **Only house one snake per enclosure.**

## **Feeding**

Baby kingsnakes and milk snakes do best on a diet of pinky mice, generally one or two pinky mice per week. As the snake grows, so should its prey. A general rule of thumb is to feed a snake a food item that is as large as, or slightly larger than, the diameter of the snake at its widest point (excluding the head). Feed frozen mice that have been thawed completely in warm water and dried with a paper towel. If you have difficulty getting your snake to eat frozen/thawed mice, you can aid in the transition by feeding freshly killed mice, then move to frozen/thawed.

If you are keeping your snake on a loose substrate (reptile bark, aspen, etc.) do not feed your snake in its enclosure. Loose substrate can stick to prey items and be ingested, causing potential health problems.

Occasionally, a snake may refuse to feed. Food refusal is caused by a number of things such as incorrect environmental conditions, a shed phase, being gravid (pregnant), or illness. If your snake refuses food for more than four weeks, has the correct environmental conditions (including hiding spots), is not shedding and has never been with a member of the opposite sex, it should be checked for illness. Some snakes will refuse food in the winter, even if provided with the correct environmental conditions and if they are not sick, shedding, or gravid. These snakes are acting upon their instinct to hibernate and should be allowed to do so.

Make sure to provide a bowl with enough fresh water to allow soaking, but not so much as to cause overflowing into the enclosure when the snake enters. Change this water regularly, especially since snakes often use water to defecate.

## **Maintenance**

Provide a constant source of fresh water, cleaning the bowl weekly. Spot clean the enclosure every day for unwanted material and feces. Cleaning solutions such as Chlorhexidine or vinegar and water can be used. Make sure to replace old bedding with fresh bedding when cleaning, and wash any reptile carpet or liner as needed (at least monthly).

## **Handling**

Snakes are escape artists! When handling your snake make sure to watch carefully and always have at least one hand on the animal. If your snake is skittish or aggressive when being handled, increasing the frequency of handling will help improve your snake's comfort when out of its enclosure.

## **Hibernation/Winter Cooling**

Some snake species, including most *Lampropeltis* species, may hibernate for some time during the cooler season. To hibernate your kingsnake or milk snake, make sure it has no food for 3-4 weeks but still has access to a warm spot so that it can remove all material from its digestive tract. Last meal should be the end of October with cool down starting at Thanksgiving. At this time, the temperature should be lowered gradually to between 60-65°F. The snake should not be fed during this time, but fresh drinking water should be provided. Leave the snake in these conditions, checking on it frequently for up to 3 months. After this time, usually around mid-February slowly warm the animal back up to its maintenance temperature and offer small sized

food for its first few meals. After a few feedings normal sized meals should be given. **Only hibernate your snake if you are completely comfortable doing so!**