

Questions & Answers

Lighting Corns



Q I am just starting out with my first corn snake. Do they need basking lamps? There seems to be a lot of conflicting advice. Some people have told me they do, whereas others have said that this is not necessary, and a normal household bulb can be used to light the vivarium. But the kit that I bought, supposedly for corn snakes, came with a 2% UV bulb which seems ridiculously bright! What sort of lighting do I need to use?! Also, can I keep two corn snakes together?

A The care of corn snakes is now very well-documented, although there is still conflicting information out there. Snakes from a hot area like south-eastern parts of the USA where they occur will spend some time basking in heat in the wild. Look at our own adder - I would guess the only time that they are really conspicuous is when they are sunbathing. This is for various reasons including thermoregulation, and the pathway of chemical reactions taking place in the skin that lead to vitamin D₃ production.

It is true that snakes can obtain D₃ from the

livers of the prey they eat, but this is not the only impact natural sunlight has on snakes. These reptiles are tetrachromatic, which means that they use the component of ultraviolet component of sunlight known as UVA to see properly. These are just some of the benefits that we know about, linked to exposure to natural sunlight and others are likely to await discovery.

I recommend using a safe and controlled heat source like a heat mat affixed to the back wall to negate wet burn. A good halogen heat spot should be fitted into a caged lamp holder and used again with a thermostat. I would also operate this via a 24 hour timer and run the heat spot to recreate full sun from 11am until 2pm, mimicking the full power and height of the sun.

Your snake can then chose when and where to soak up plain heat. I recommend a halogen heat source as unlike fragile tungsten lamps, these tough and splash resistant lamps have a longer life and a stable, high heat output. Halogen lamps can also be safely dimmed without significantly reducing the lifespan of the lamp.

I always insist on the benefits of a good quality 2% natural sunlight lamp. This will give the UVA for vision and hormonal balance, combined with UVB which contributes to the overall well-being of the snake. It also provides a good natural sunlight colour in the enclosure, which will make the snake appear more attractive and easier to see. Change UV lamps once a year in the case of European lamps and four times a year with those manufactured in Asia, to ensure a consistent UV output.

All diurnal and crepuscular snakes - and indeed, other reptiles - benefit from UV in the right dose. Even colour morphs and albinos, but please remember that any animal with pink eyes such as the candy cane shown here will be more sensitive to light than usual. This does not mean that they do not need natural sunlight - instead, they just need lots of cover to hide their head away while they are sunbathing.

All corn, milk and king snakes are well-known as preying on other snakes. Be aware these are not safe snakes to house together therefore. They are all unpredictable animals and opportunist feeders. Although people do keep these snakes together for long periods of time with no problems, it is risky, with aggression being most likely to arise at feeding times. Personally I wouldn't recommend it therefore.
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