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This handout is intended to provide only very general guidelines. Consult with your veterinarian about other aspects of advanced care that can be considered to ensure adequate health.

General Information

Boa constrictors are large bodied, nonvenomous, live-bearing snakes that encompass many species from Central and South America with multiple different subspecies based on locality. This care sheet applies to all Central and South American boas and their various subspecies, including red tail boas. Their name comes from their preferred method of hunting: constriction.

Lifespan

Boas' life expectancy is 20-25 years on average with adequate care.

Sexing

Adult females can get up to 8-10 feet in length with males being slightly smaller. However, the most common way to determine the gender of snakes is to have them probed. This is the process of inserting a small metal probe into the cloaca and then the depth of the probe is measured (by the number of scales it advances) to determine if it is a male or a female. The probe will travel further in a male as it will enter the hemipene pocket.

Housing

Ideally your snake should have enough room to stretch the entire length of its body straight without touching the ends. A newly hatched snake would do well in a 20-gallon enclosure, but would grow rapidly, so a larger enclosure will be needed. The lid of the enclosure needs to be secure as snakes can stretch to the top of their tanks and forcibly push a lid off. The cage should contain at least two hides that have only one opening (not the half logs) and allow the snake to fit snugly within it. Lack of appropriate hides will cause stress. Only one boa constrictor should be kept per cage.

Substrate

Newspapers, paper towels or artificial turf like reptile carpet can be used for minimal mess and clean up. Aspen shavings, mulch, and soil allow burrowing but are more difficult to clean and can harbor mold or bacterial growth if not cleaned regularly. Sand and cedar or pine shavings should be avoided.

Lighting and temperature

Reptiles are ectotherms (cold-blooded), meaning that they need to absorb heat from their environment to regulate their own body temperature. The basking spot should be around **85-90 °F** and the cooler end of the cage should be kept around **75-80 °F**. A thermometer should be placed at both ends of the cage or an infrared laser thermometer can be used to accurately measure temperatures. Ball pythons do not require UVB lighting, however there is emerging evidence that they may benefit from it. Providing UVB should be considered.

Water

A shallow water dish big enough for your whole snake's body to fit in curled up should always be available and fresh water should be added daily. Snakes enjoy full body soakings but often defecate in their water, so it needs to be cleaned often.

Humidity

Humidity in the enclosure should be 50-60% and should be monitored by a hygrometer. Inadequate humidity will affect your reptile's ability to shed its skin properly and can predispose them to respiratory infections.

Diet

Boa constrictors feed on a variety of prey in the wild. Rodents are the most reliable prey item for animals in captivity. Young boas should be fed once weekly, while adults can be fed every 10-14 days. Prey should be no bigger in circumference than the boa's girth at mid-body. Feeding thawed frozen prey is preferred as live prey can cause unwanted aggression and may even cause harm to your snake. Frozen prey should be thawed in hot water- do not microwave prey. Frozen prey should also be used within 6 months of feeding.

Snake weight (grams)	Prey weight (grams)	Prey size	Frequency of feedings
80-200	12-20	Rat fuzzy or Small mouse	5-7 days
200-299	22-34	Rat pup or Medium-large mouse	Weekly
300-499	35-44	Weaned rat or 1 XL or 2 large mice	Weekly
500-699	55-74	Small rat or 2-3 large/ XL mice	Weekly
700-999	75-99	Large small to smaller medium rat	7-14 days
1,000-1,499 (female)	100-149	Medium rat	10-14 days
1,000+ (male)	75-99	Large small to smaller Medium rat	>14-21 days
1,500+ (female)	120-165	Medium rate	>14-21 days

Common Medical Conditions

Respiratory Infections

- Clinical signs include wheezing or clicking with breathing noises, bubbles from the nose or mouth, frequent yawning or open mouth breathing, holding head pointed upwards while resting, getting substrate stuck in the mouth, and not eating.
- Not all signs need to be present to be consistent with respiratory infection. Since so many infections are viral in origin the treatment with antibiotics is not always successful.

Not Eating ("hunger strike")

- Can persist for weeks to months depending on the cause and may or may not be a major health concern.
- Continue to offer prey every few weeks, review and optimize husbandry, and reduce handling until interest in food resumes. If weight loss or any other health problems are observed, then it is recommended to seek veterinary care.

Inclusion Body Disease (IBD)

- Caused by Arenavirus and is very common in boa constrictors across the US
- Symptoms include neurologic signs such as "stargazing", rolling over onto their back, tremors, regurgitation, weight loss, or immune suppression causing stomatitis, pneumonia, skin tumors, or leukemia.
- Generally fatal once symptoms start.

References

Animal Hospital in Centennial, CO. Aurora Animal Hospital. (n.d.). <https://www.auroraanimalhospital.com/>

Divers, S. J., & Stahl, S. J. (2019). *Mader's reptile and Amphibian Medicine and Surgery*. Elsevier.