



General care

The most common problem to avoid is crushing injuries to delicate hatchlings, often from unsupervised small children, during rough handling. Typical symptoms are sudden refusal to feed and inactivity, often followed by sudden death.

Frozen feed needs to be carefully thawed and warmed to blood heat before offering, to avoid stomach upsets and vomiting. Regurgitation can also be caused by too low environmental temperature and some diseases.

The snake's eyes will become cloudy from time to time. This indicates that it is about to shed its old skin. Higher humidity in its hide is useful at this time to assist the shed. Keepers should check especially that both eye covers are shed successfully.

Respiratory problems are indicated by mouth gaping and/or bubbly mucous from the mouth or nostrils. Mouth gaping or inability to close neatly, due to swelling, can be indicative of mouth infections.

These snakes can be cannibalistic and are best housed together only for reproduction purposes. If you are at all worried about the health of your snake you should consult your specialist reptile vet as soon as possible.



Shopping list

Vivarium	<input type="checkbox"/>	Water bowl	<input type="checkbox"/>
Heat mat/heat bulb	<input type="checkbox"/>	Substrate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thermostat	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hide(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thermometer(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Branches	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pet safe disinfectant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Frozen mice/baby rats	<input type="checkbox"/>
A good book that covers king and/or milk snakes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

This leaflet is produced by the Pet Care Trust, the national charity that promotes the benefits of pet ownership and education. For more information, go to www.petcare.org.uk, or phone 01234 273933.



Remember you must never release your pet into the wild.

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CARING FOR YOUR KING OR MILK SNAKE

King and Milk snakes originate from North and Central America. Their habitat varies from desert to mountains to woodland. Adults are relatively small, easy to feed and can withstand a relatively large temperature range. They are generally good natured and can be ideal as a first snake or for the experienced hobbyist alike. There is a range of species and an increasing array of domesticated colour morphs available. Almost all King and Milk snakes available are captive bred.

**Adult length 75-200 cm
(sexually mature at 18-24 months). Life span
15-25 years**





Choosing and buying your snake

Good health is indicated by the snake being alert and inquisitive, indicated by extensive tongue flicking in new situations; it should feel 'strong', and not flaccid, in your hands. Good condition is indicated by a body cross-section that is more rounded than angular.

Look for mites, tiny external parasites that suck blood. Pet stores sell remedies, or more serious infestations may need veterinary prescribed treatments.

The vent should be clean and free of any encrustation, indicative of diarrhoea. The body should be symmetrical, clean, and free of swelling, unless recently fed.



Housing

A well ventilated, adequately heated, escape proof vivarium, is the best housing for your King or Milk snake. Although most snakes are frequently inactive, and will voluntarily live comfortably for days or even weeks in a space just sufficient to accommodate their coiled bodies, the long term accommodation should be of such a size to allow freedom of movement and be at least two-thirds the length of the snake and preferably larger. There must be no gaps between glass sliding doors sufficient to allow a hatchling to squeeze through.

All reptiles are cold blooded and need an external heat source to maintain their body temperature. Only one end of the vivarium should be heated. This creates a thermal gradient allowing the snake to choose its preferred temperature. Thermometers can be placed at each end to monitor the temperature range. The maximum temperature of the heat gradient can be controlled by a thermostat. Wire mesh guards fitted over exposed hot heat sources will prevent thermal burns.

Temperature

Gentle heat can be provided by using heat mats and more intense heat by spot lights or heat lamps. Your pet shop can advise on heating products that are suitable. The ideal thermal gradient is 24-25°C at the cool end and 30-32°C at the hot end. Night temperatures dropping to 20°C will cause no harm.

Substrate

The floor of the cage should be covered with a dry substrate, such as aspen wood shavings or sani-chips, coconut bark, or cypress mulch.

Furnishings

Compact hides are good for the well being of most snakes, including King and Milk snakes; placed at both ends of the thermal gradient provides the snake with more choice.

Lighting

King and Milk snakes do not need any special lighting but may appreciate UVB lamps more closely create their natural conditions although this is not at all necessary for successful captive maintenance or breeding.

Cleaning and watering

A King or Milk snake should be provided with a no-tip water bowl which is large enough for the snake to submerge in, especially when shedding its skin. This should be washed and cleaned regularly. Vivariums should be spot cleaned, as soon as droppings are produced, and disinfected with a pet safe disinfectant occasionally. Soiled substrate should be safely disposed of and replaced with fresh.



Feeding and Water

King and Milk snakes are carnivores and feed principally on mice or rats. They consume their food whole. The food offered should be no larger than a maximum of one and a half times the diameter of the snakes mid-body.

Young snakes can be fed every 2-5 days and adults fed every 7 – 14 days. Adults in breeding mode may fast for many weeks.

Frozen food should be carefully defrosted in a bowl of cold water.

When two or more snakes are kept together (for these species normally only for reproductive purposes), the owner should ensure that one does not swallow another if they try to consume the same item of food; it is best to feed them in separate containers. Handling a King or Milk snake before, during, or after feeding, or when the odour of its food is on your hands, may result in a painful bite.



Handling

King and Milk snakes can occasionally bite unexpectedly, without striking. It is often because they are hungry. A bite from a hatchling is uncomfortable rather than painful. Handled gently, they soon become tame. The snake should be held loosely and supported at the middle and rear of the body, the handler's movements being slow and deliberate.

NB: Always wash your hands after handling, and never attempt to handle a snake until it has settled down and is feeding regularly.

Reptiles can carry a form of Salmonella. Good hygiene and washing your hands after handling your snake should be sufficient to prevent any risk of infection.