

# Garter Snake

*Thamnophis spp*



## CARE SHEET

Developed with and approved by a Qualified Veterinarian

These snakes are found throughout North America and seldom wander very far from the water. Some species of water snakes can be squirmy when handled, but do calm down in captivity with frequent handling. They require a habitat that is large for their size, but they are relatively easy to maintain.



### Is a garter snake the right companion animal for you?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Check "Yes" or "No" after reading the following statements:

1. I can accommodate a snake that may grow to five feet.
2. I am comfortable handling a snake.
3. I am comfortable feeding live food to a snake.
4. I can commit to providing proper care for this snake.
5. A mature person will provide responsible and primary care for this companion animal.

If you answered "Yes" to these statements, a garter snake may be the right choice for you! Continue reading about how to care for a garter snake and consult with a PETCO associate to learn more. PETCO is committed to responsible companion animal care.

**Average Size** 2 to 5 feet long

**Life Span** Up to 15+ years with proper care

**Diet** Appropriately sized frozen thawed rodents and nightcrawlers

Fish species such as rosy red minnows and goldfish should not be fed exclusively as they can cause health problems if overfed.

**Feeding** Feed 2 to 3 times a week

**Housing** Size – Appropriate size and shape habitat to accommodate normal behaviors and exercise with secure lid

Substrate – Provide a deep substrate, such as bark chips, aspen shavings, sphagnum moss, or sterile potting soil; keep substrate dry

Habitat – Provide a hiding place, such as cork bark or a hide box, and branches for climbing; maintain relatively humid conditions

Temperature – Temperature gradient (85° F. for the warm end and 65° F. for the cool end); recommend radiant heat; use an incandescent light or ceramic heater as primary heat source, use undertank heater as secondary source

Lighting – Snakes need a photoperiod light cycle; provide 8–12 hours of light daily; do not leave white light on at all times; to view snakes at night, use a black or infrared light

Water – Provide a large bowl of fresh, chlorine-free water for drinking and swimming

Do not house different species of reptiles together

### Recommended Supplies

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Habitat with secure lid        | <input type="checkbox"/> Substrate                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thermometer                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Hide box or driftwood                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Misting bottle                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Water dish                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humidity gauge                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Undertank heat source                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Book about garter snakes       | <input type="checkbox"/> Incandescent light or ceramic heater |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vitamin and mineral supplement |   |

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- Normal Behavior and Interaction** Garter snakes are mainly diurnal (awake during the day), but are often active in the early evening  
Some species are extremely active compared to other snakes
- Habitat Maintenance** Change water daily  
Thoroughly clean the tank at least once a week: set snake aside in a secure habitat; scrub the tank and furnishings with a 3% bleach solution; rinse thoroughly with water, removing all smell of bleach; dry the tank and furnishings; and add clean substrate
- Grooming and Hygiene** Garter snakes will regularly shed their skin; ensure humidity of habitat is at appropriate level to allow snake to shed properly; to facilitate shedding, provide a large water bowl allowing snake to immerse entire body  
Because all snakes are potential carriers of infectious diseases and salmonella, always wash your hands before and after handling your snake and/or the habitat contents to help prevent the potential of spread of diseases.  
Pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems should contact their physician before purchasing and/or caring for a snake and should consider not having a snake as a pet. For more information regarding snakes and disease, contact the Center for Disease Control at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/> and PETCO at <http://www.petco.com/pet care info/animal care sheets>.

### Signs of a Healthy Animal

- Clear eyes (except when shedding)
- Clear nose and mouth
- Body is rounded and full
- Active and alert
- Eats regularly
- Healthy skin

### Common Health Issues

Health Issue (alpha)	Symptoms or Causes	Suggested Action
Dermatitis	Blisters. Rapid shedding caused by an unclean habitat or one that is too cold or damp.	Clean the cage and lower humidity. Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.
Respiratory Disease	Labored breathing. Mucus in mouth or nostrils. Can be caused by a habitat that is too cold or damp.	Keep snake warm and dry. Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.
Stomatitis	White, cheesy substance in the mouth; loss of teeth and appetite.	If untreated, can be fatal. Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.
Ticks and Mites	Parasites on skin. Can transmit disease.	Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.

### Red Flags

- Wrinkled or rubbed skin
- Discharge in nose or mouth
- Abnormal feces or urine
- Vomiting
- Lethargy
- Decreased appetite

**If you notice any of these signs, please contact your exotic animal veterinarian.**

- Sources** *A Petkeeper's Guide to Reptiles & Amphibians* by David Alderton  
*Keeping and Breeding Snakes* by Chris Mattison  
*The Proper Care of Snakes* by Armin Geus

**Note:** The information on this Care Sheet is not a substitute for veterinary care. If you need additional information, please refer to the above sources or contact your veterinarian as appropriate.