

Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*)

Difficulty: Easy

Milksnakes can be identified by smooth scales, no differentiation between the head and neck, a small rounded head, and moderately slender body. Based on subspecies, milksnakes can vary widely in length, from as small as 14" / 36cm to as large as 72" / 183 cm. Exact color and pattern varies by subspecies: many are banded with some combination of red/orange, black, and white/yellow; but some have a red/orange/brown saddle pattern with dark edges on a gray to cream base. Sometimes they are mistaken for venomous coral snakes. Other colors and patterns are available in captivity due to selective breeding ("morphs").

This species is primarily native to the United States, although they are present in some parts of southern Canada. Due to their extremely wide range, they have adapted to a wide variety of habitats, including forests/woodland, rocky hillsides, swamps, prairie, farmland, and sand dunes.

Due to their vivid coloring, milksnakes are among the most popular pet snakes in the United States. They're manageably-sized, fairly hardy, and generally tolerate human interaction well, which makes them good pets for people who are new to snakes.

With good care, milksnakes can live 20 years or more.

Shopping List

- 48" x 24" x 24" reptile enclosure (preferably front-opening)
- Dual dome heat lamp with ceramic sockets
- 50w PAR38 halogen flood bulb, x2
- Plug-in lamp dimmer, x2
- Large, flat rock (for basking)
- Digital thermometer/hygrometer device with probes, x2
- Infrared thermometer ("temperature gun")
- 22" T5 HO forest UVB bulb (Arcadia or Zoo Med brand)
- 24" T5 HO light fixture with reflector
- Pressure sprayer
- Surge protector with digital timer
- 80 quarts of naturalistic substrate
- Small black plastic box hide
- Additional hides/caves
- Environmental enrichment items (hollow logs, sturdy branches, live/fake plants, etc.)
- Water bowl
- Calcium and multivitamin powder supplement
- Feeding tongs, at least 12"

Housing

Different subspecies of milksnakes grow to different lengths, so while 48”L x 24”W x 24”H / 1.2 x 6 x 6m is a good starting point, the actual minimum requirement for your particular snake may be different. Use this formula as your guide, based on the expected adult length for your subspecies: *snake length x half snake length x half snake length = length x width x height*

Of course, using a larger enclosure than the minimum is strongly recommended. Bigger is always better!

Can multiple milksnakes be housed together?

Milksnakes are not social animals, and there is no significant benefit to the animal that would justify keeping two or more in the same enclosure. In fact, given that milksnakes are known to be ophiophagus (snake-eaters), it's safest to house only one milksnake per enclosure.

Lighting & UVB

Based on data from milksnakes' native range, lights should be on for 15 hours/day during summer and 9 hours/day during winter, with gradual adjustments in-between. I've found that the easiest way to accomplish this is with a smart power strip like the [Kasa Smart Plug Power Strip](#), but you can also do this with something simpler like a programmable digital power strip.

Milksnakes are primarily active at night, so they don't need much in the way of bright lighting.

UVB Lighting

UVB lighting has also been proven to be beneficial to snakes' health. So although milksnakes can technically survive without UVB, we strongly recommend providing it in order to promote optimum welfare in captivity.

UVB lighting can be tricky, because in order to get the right strength of UVB (UV Index, or UVI), distance and potential mesh obstruction must be considered. To provide appropriate UVB for a milksnake, you will need a [Zoo Med T5 HO Reptisun 5.0](#) or [Arcadia T5 HO Forest 6%](#) bulb, long enough to span half of the enclosure and placed on the warm side of the enclosure, preferably not obstructed by mesh.

The basking branch or platform should be placed according to the following, with distance being measured between the UVB lamp and the height of the snake when on the basking surface.

- With mesh obstruction: 9-12”
- Without mesh obstruction: 12-14”

Use an [Arcadia ProT5](#) or [Vivarium Electronics](#) fixture for best results.

Heating

Humans are *warm-blooded*, which means that our body temperature is automatically regulated. Milksnakes, however, are *cold-blooded*, which means that they have to move between areas of different temperatures in order to regulate their body temperature. Milksnakes typically warm up by sleeping under objects that have been warmed by the sun, but they are also known to bask openly on occasion. In captivity, using a halogen flood heat bulb is the best way to replicate the type of warmth provided by sunlight.

- **Basking surface: 85-90°F (29-32°C)**
- **Cool side: 75-80°F (23-27°C)**
- **Nighttime: 70-75°F (21-23°C)**

Generally speaking, 50w PAR30 halogen flood bulbs should be plenty to achieve your target basking surface temperature. The basking rock should be placed on top of the black plastic hide box, which will act as your warm hide. If you notice that they're getting too hot, dial it down with a plug-in lamp dimmer. If your basking surface is too cool, you need higher wattage bulbs.

You will need multiple heat bulbs to create a large enough basking area to evenly heat your milksnake's coiled body. Two bulbs should be enough for an average milksnake, but particularly large subspecies may need up to four. Place a black plastic box hide under the basking stone to create a warm hiding place for the snake to use.

To measure the basking surface temperature, use an infrared thermometer (a.k.a. temperature gun). To measure the temperature of the warm hide, use a digital probe thermometer. The Etekcity 774 is a good infrared thermometer, and most reptile-brand digital probe thermometers function well.

Heating should be turned off at night.

Humidity

Milksnakes generally need an **average humidity of 40-60%**, as measured by a digital probe hygrometer with the probe place in the middle of the enclosure. Humidity levels that are consistently higher or lower than this range can make your pet unwell, although it is normal for humidity to be higher on the cool end and lower on the warm end, as well as higher at night. Specific optimal humidity levels may vary by which subspecies you're keeping.

To raise humidity in your snake's enclosure, you can use a pressure sprayer to mist the habitat as needed. It's also a good idea to place moistened sphagnum moss inside the cool hide to create a humid retreat. Check and change this moss regularly to prevent mold growth. Placing a layer of leaf litter on top of the substrate can also help maintain humidity.

Substrate

Milksnakes are healthiest and happiest when they are housed on a substrate (a.k.a. "bedding") that imitates the conditions of their natural habitat and facilitates moderate humidity levels. Soil is generally best for meeting this need.

Zoo Med Reptisoil, Lugarti Natural Reptile Bedding, coconut fiber, and the Bio Dude Terra Firma kit are the most soil-like commercial substrates for milksnakes. Shredded aspen may also be suitable in a pinch, although it molds easily. Alternatively, you can use a DIY mix of 40% organic, additive-free topsoil + 40% Zoo Med Reptisoil + 20% play sand.

Provide a substrate layer that is around 4" deep, which takes about 80 quarts of substrate for a 4x2x2 enclosure. Provide a generous layer of clean leaf litter on top for humidity and to give your snake something to explore.

Feces and urates should be removed daily, and contaminated substrate should be scooped out and replaced. Substrate should be completely replaced once every 3-4 months.

Décor

Decorations play an important role in your milksnakes enclosure as environmental enrichment. Enrichment items encourage exercise, stimulate your snake's natural instincts, and help promote overall wellbeing. And, of course, they make the enclosure look nice! Choose at least 3 of the following to add diversity to your pet's habitat.

Décor ideas: additional hideouts/caves, cork logs, sturdy branches, sturdy live or artificial plants

Food

Milksnakes are carnivores, which means that they need a diet of whole animal prey in order to get the nutrition that their bodies need:

- **Hatchlings — every 5-7 days**
- **Juveniles — every 7-10 days**
- **Adults — every 10-14 days**

The size of your milksnake's prey should be no more than 1.5x the width of the snake at its widest point, or roughly 10% of its body weight. If the snake seems to be getting fat, reduce the frequency of feedings or the size of the feeders.

Although mice are the most common feeders, snakes need to eat more than just rats and mice to truly thrive. The key to providing a healthy, balanced diet for your pet snake is VARIETY. Provide as varied of a diet as you possibly can, and you will be rewarded with a healthier, less picky pet!

Prey item ideas: mice, young rats, hamster, gerbils, young quail, quail eggs, chicks, reptile eggs, green anoles, small snakes, Reptilinks

It's best to offer frozen-thawed prey rather than live to your pet snake. This is safer for the snake and generally considered to be more humane as well. Use soft-tipped feeding tweezers to reduce the risk of getting accidentally bitten when the snake strikes.

Supplements

Snakes can survive without vitamin or mineral supplements, but using them occasionally is a good way to help prevent nutritional deficiencies. Every once in a while, lightly dust the prey item with a 50/50 mix of calcium and multivitamin before thawing.

Arcadia RevitaliseD3 and Repashy CalciumPlus are both good supplements to use.

Water

Your milksnake should have free access to a large bowl of fresh, clean water daily. It should be large enough for the snake to curl up inside if it's in the mood for a soak. Scrub the water dish with veterinary disinfectant every week to discourage pathogen growth.