

Mite Identification & Treatment Guide

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Mites are among most snake keepers' greatest fears, and for good reason. These tiny little pests can be difficult to eliminate once they've established themselves in a snake's environment, and they pose significant risk to snakes. They latch onto and feed on the blood of reptiles, which not only causes great discomfort to the animal, but can lead to them becoming anemic and even killing them, due to the fact that mites can reproduce very quickly. They are also known to spread diseases. Luckily, while a mite infestation may seem overwhelming, they are very much preventable and treatable with a little attention and the right resources, which will be explained in this guide

What They Are, What They Look Like, and Where They Come From

Ophionyssus natricis, the mites commonly found in captive reptiles, were first noted and described in animals collected across Europe in the mid-1800s, but are also found in the wild in Africa, Asia, and parts of both North and South America. They are mostly seen on snakes, but may also be found on many other reptiles, such as lizards and turtles. The larvae are white, and if they do not feed in this stage, they remain a lighter color, while those that do turn dark brown or dark red. Adult males can range in color, from a yellowish-brown to black, while the females are black. Females are known to be larger than the males and can very easily be seen, particularly after feeding.

What They Are Not

Occasionally, people may be surprised to discover that tiny white mites have suddenly appeared in their enclosures. While this discovery can be a bit upsetting, the good news is that these are harmless wood mites that often appear when wood-based substrates are used in reptile enclosures. They do not feed on reptiles and pose no threat to the animals.

What To Look For

Reptiles may display certain physical and behavioral changes when they are afflicted with mites, such as:

- **Excessive soaking**
- **Raised/irregular scales**
- **Irritability**
- **Lack of appetite**
- **Shedding difficulties**

The mites themselves can also be seen, and generally appear as black or dark red specks floating in the water dish or even on your hands after handling your reptile.

How to Prevent a Mite Infestation

The single most important thing you can do upon obtaining a new animal is set up a quarantine area for the new arrival. Mites spread quickly and easily through collections, so it is crucial to observe any new animal to ensure that it is free of mites before introducing it to an area near other reptiles. The best way to do this is to create a simple temporary tub enclosure so that any potential mites can be quickly spotted, treated, and eliminated. Using paper towels as substrate during

this time helps a lot due to the fact that the mites are easily visible against them, whereas they can easily blend into most other kinds of substrates such as barks or coconut fiber. The quarantine period should last about three months and is an important step even if there aren't any other reptiles in the home, as it will help ensure that the animal is healthy.

Eliminating Mites

Once you've confirmed that your reptile has mites, it's important to start swiftly treating both the animal *and* the enclosure to eliminate them. This will include using certain chemicals that can harm the reptile if they are not used properly, so make sure to pay careful attention to what you're using and how you are using it.

- **Treating the enclosure for mites:** Provent-A-Mite, Frontline spray, or Nix diluted in water are incredibly effective at killing mites inhabiting the enclosure, but they should never be used directly on the animal. The enclosure needs to air dry completely before returning the reptile back in the enclosure, and the water bowl should not be placed back in the enclosure for 24-48 hours after treatment.
- **Treating the snake for mites:** a shallow bath of room temperature water and Dawn dish soap won't disrupt the life cycle of the mites, but it's very effective at physically removing any mites from your snake. Be sure to place the snake in the water before adding any soap to give it a chance to drink first so that no soap is ingested.