## **YVCipedia REPTILE**

Milk Snake Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum* complex) are **colorful, non-venomous colubrids** native to North and Central America. Known for their striking banded patterns in red, black, and white or yellow, they’re often mistaken for coral snakes—a resemblance that’s thought to help deter predators in the wild.

Milk snakes are **active, hardy, and adaptable**, making them excellent pets for keepers prepared to provide a secure, escape-proof enclosure and consistent care. They tend to be **curious but may be shy or defensive when stressed**, especially as juveniles. With proper husbandry, they typically live **15–20 years** in captivity.

## **Housing & Environment**

Milk snakes are **terrestrial, secretive, and excellent burrowers**—they need secure enclosures with plenty of hiding places.

**Minimum enclosure size:**

* Juveniles: 20-gallon long tank
* Adults: At least **40 gallons** or 36–48 inches long
* Larger enclosures encourage exercise and enrichment

**Important enclosure features:**

* Tight-fitting, escape-proof lid or doors (they are skilled escape artists)
* Multiple hides: one on the warm side, one on the cool side
* Branches or driftwood for low climbing
* Burrow-friendly substrate for digging and security

**Recommended substrates:**

* Aspen shavings (excellent for burrowing)
* Cypress mulch
* Paper-based bedding for low-maintenance setups
* Avoid cedar or pine shavings (toxic oils)

**Cleaning guidelines:**

* Spot-clean feces and urates daily or as needed
* Replace substrate fully and disinfect the enclosure monthly or as needed

## **Heating & Lighting**

Milk snakes are **ectothermic** and need a stable temperature gradient to thermoregulate.

**Temperature gradient:**

* **Warm side/hot spot:** 85–88°F
* **Cool side:** 72–78°F
* **Nighttime:** Can drop safely to ~70°F

**Heating:**

* Under-tank heat mat controlled by a **thermostat** to maintain safe belly heat
* Overhead ceramic heat emitters or low-wattage bulbs as needed
* Avoid heat rocks, which can cause burns

**Lighting:**

* Milk snakes are generally crepuscular/nocturnal and do **not require UVB**, but **low-level UVB (2–5%) may offer benefits** for overall health
* Provide a consistent **12-hour light/dark cycle** using timers

## **Humidity**

Milk snakes prefer **moderate humidity** in the **40–60%** range.

**Humidity management tips:**

* Light misting if needed
* Provide a **humid hide** with damp sphagnum moss, especially during shedding cycles
* Monitor with a **digital hygrometer** for accuracy

Proper humidity helps **support shedding** and overall hydration.

## **Water & Hydration**

Always offer **clean, fresh water** in a stable, tip-resistant bowl.

**Water care tips:**

* Change water daily to prevent bacterial growth
* Clean and disinfect the dish weekly or more often if soiled
* Many milk snakes will soak before shedding—ensure the bowl is large enough for this

## **Diet & Feeding**

Milk snakes are **strict carnivores**, feeding on appropriately sized whole prey.

**Feeding guidelines:**

* Prey size ≈ 1–1.5× the widest part of the snake’s body
* Juveniles: Feed every 5–7 days
* Adults: Feed every 7–14 days depending on size, age, and metabolism

**Feeding tips:**

* Use **frozen/thawed rodents** (never live prey to avoid injury)
* Feed in the enclosure or in a separate tub depending on temperament
* Avoid handling for 48 hours after feeding to prevent regurgitation
* Monitor body condition to avoid obesity

## **Behavior & Handling**

Milk snakes can be **shy or defensive when young** but generally become **docile with gentle, consistent handling**.

**Handling recommendations:**

* Wash hands before and after to avoid scent confusion or disease transmission
* Support the entire body without restraining tightly
* Avoid sudden movements that may startle
* Keep sessions short at first to build trust
* Avoid handling right after feeding

Regular, calm handling can reduce stress and help milk snakes become comfortable with human interaction.

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Schedule an **initial veterinary exam** after acquisition and plan for **annual wellness checkups** with a reptile-savvy veterinarian.

**Common health issues:**

* Respiratory infections (often from incorrect temps or humidity)
* External parasites (mites)
* Internal parasites (especially in wild-caught snakes)
* Shedding problems (dysecdysis)
* Stomatitis (mouth infections)
* Obesity from overfeeding or improper diet

**Warning signs:**

* Lethargy or weakness
* Persistent refusal to eat (beyond normal seasonal slow-downs)
* Wheezing, open-mouth breathing, or nasal discharge
* Retained shed, especially around the eyes
* Swollen jaw or mouth lesions
* Unexplained weight loss

Prompt veterinary care improves outcomes and helps prevent complications.

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

Milk snakes are **active, curious, and benefit greatly from a well-designed, enriched environment**.

**Enrichment strategies:**

* Multiple secure hides of varying sizes and textures
* Substrate that supports burrowing
* Branches or driftwood for limited climbing
* Rearranging décor periodically to encourage exploration
* Varying textures and cover to provide security and interest

Enrichment promotes **natural behaviors** and helps reduce stress.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Named “milk snakes” due to an old myth that they drank milk from cows—they do not!
* Famous for their **red, black, and white/yellow bands**, which mimic venomous coral snakes.
* Non-venomous **constrictors**, safe to handle with proper socialization.
* Thrive in **a wide range of habitats** in North and Central America.
* Can live **15–20+ years** in captivity with appropriate care.

### **Supplies & Care Checklist**

* Escape-proof enclosure (≥40 gallons for adults)
* Under-tank heat mat with thermostat
* Digital thermometers and hygrometer
* Secure hides (warm and cool sides)
* Branches and driftwood for climbing
* Moist hide with damp moss for shedding support
* Appropriate substrate (aspen, cypress mulch, paper-based)
* Stable, tip-resistant water dish
* Tongs for safe feeding
* Frozen/thawed appropriately sized rodents
* Cleaning supplies and reptile-safe disinfectants
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*