



Scale Rot In Snakes: Causes, Treatment & Prevention

Scale rot is a very common issue that many snake owners face. This condition can quickly spiral out of control, leading to serious health complications for your pet.

What Is Scale Rot?

Scale rot is an overarching medical term used to describe vesicular dermatitis, blister disease, or other types of dermatitis seen in snakes. Scale rot is also used to describe burns, bacterial abscesses, and secondary bacterial infections resulting from burns or skin abrasions.

Scale rot is common in snakes (even low-maintenance ones like the ball python), but can occur with other reptiles as well. If scale rot is left untreated, bacteria can reach a snake's bloodstream, causing septicemia, which can be fatal in a matter of days for small snakes.

This is why it's so important to have a strong understanding of this medical issue, so you can protect or treat your snake. Preventing scale rot from ever becoming an issue with your pet snake will lead to a happier and longer life for them.

Scale Rot Causes

Scale rot in snakes can be caused by several things. While most of the things that can cause scale rot have to do with a suboptimal or unsanitary enclosure, there are a couple others you should be aware of as well.

Understanding the cause is incredibly important if you want to treat and prevent this condition from coming back in the future. Remember, as an owner it's your responsibility to stay informed on the general health of your snake and the state of their enclosure.

1. Elevated Humidity

Your snake's enclosure needs to have the right amount of humidity in order for your pet to thrive and avoid scale rot. This is why it's incredibly important to verify how much humidity your specific breed of snake needs, since all species are different.

If your snake's enclosure has too much humidity for them, it can lead to problems with their scales (such as scale rot). The enclosure's humidity level plays a role in your snake's ability to shed correctly. If your snake cannot shed completely, the places skin is retained are susceptible to scale rot.

There are several things you can do to manage your snake's terrarium humidity level. Use proper bedding, use heat lamps appropriately, and cover two-thirds of the top screen with plastic wrap to help control humidity. Placing your snake's enclosure in direct sunlight or near drafts can decrease the humidity level too much, so avoid placing the terrarium in these areas.

2. Insufficient Temperature In Their Habitat

The temperature you keep your snake's enclosure at will depend on the breed of snake you have. In general though, most snakes need an enclosure between 75-85 degrees Fahrenheit. If you fail to meet their temperature needs, scale rot can develop.\

Your snake should have a cave to sleep in. The cave should have a measured heating source underneath it, and this spot should be kept at the snake's ideal temperature. Other places in your snake's enclosure should be kept a degree or two warmer or a few degrees cooler than their sleeping spot. Your snake needs varying temperatures in their enclosure so they can move around and regulate their body temperature effectively.

Keeping your snake's enclosure at the right temperature is important, so you will want to invest in several thermometers to measure the floor, walls, and air in your snake's terrarium.

3. A Filthy Enclosure

A sanitary enclosure is also essential to preventing scale rot in snakes. You should clean up your snake's feces, uneaten food, and skin your snake has shed every day. You should also take everything out of the terrarium and clean it once a week.

When you do a thorough cleaning of your snake's enclosure, take everything out. Clean the terrarium as well as everything that goes in it. Wait until everything dries before you put your snake's enclosure back together.

You can use Q-tips, toothpicks, or razor blades to clean the corners of the terrarium more easily. Only use cleaning cloths and towels you have designated for cleaning your snake's enclosure to clean the terrarium.

Some people like to put their own rocks into their snake's terrarium. If you want to put your own rocks from the outdoors into your snake's home, always clean the rocks and then boil them in water for 30 minutes. Let them dry completely before placing them into the enclosure.

Paper towels or newspaper is recommended as snake substrate. Both materials are cheap and easily replaced when they get dirty.

4. Damaged Scales

It is easier for scale rot to occur when your snake's skin has been broken. To prevent this, remove anything sharp from your snake's terrarium that could potentially scratch or cut their skin.

To do this, inspect all surfaces and imagine your snake sliding over it. Anything that seems a bit sharp should be removed or adjusted.

If you feed your snake live mice or rats, make sure that they eat their prey. If your snake doesn't eat their prey, mice or rats can bite them, leaving them with a wound that can become infected.

What Scale Rot Looks Like

The sooner you can spot signs of scale rot, the better. It's a good idea to examine your snake's body every few days for signs of scale rot.

Don't handle your snake shortly after they eat, though, because they could regurgitate their meal on you! They might not wish to be handled during this time as well (leading to a possible bite).

Here are the main signs of scale rot for you to watch out for:

Discoloration

You may notice that the ventral scales (the scales on the underside of your snake's body) are discolored if they have scale rot. The scales that are most often affected by scale rot are those located directly above the cloacal region of your snake's body.

The scales may look greenish-black, brown, yellow, or red. Be aware, though, that the red ulcerations seen with scale rot can look similar to shedding. If you aren't sure whether the redness you are seeing around your snake's scales is from shedding or scale rot, look for other signs of scale rot, such as pus or blisters.

Blisters

Another sign of scale rot is pus-filled blisters on your snake's scales. Blisters are most likely to appear on the scales that have the most contact with the substrate in your snake's enclosure. The pus within these blisters is either clear or yellow in color.

Blisters are usually not infected initially. However, if scale rot is left untreated, bacteria can enter the blisters and cause them to become affected. In rare cases, fungi can enter the blisters and cause a fungal infection.

If blisters become infected with bacteria, they will become red, swollen, and ooze pus. Blisters may rupture. Scales may fall off in areas where infected blisters are present on your snake's body. You'll be able to see sores and ulcers in the area of infected blisters after your snake sheds.

If infected blisters are not properly treated, the infection can enter into your snake's bloodstream and cause septicemia. Septicemia can be fatal in just a few days.

Raised Scales

Scale rot can cause blood to pool under your snake's scales, raising them. You should be able to feel a difference in these scales if you run your hands down your snake's body.

If you notice raised scales, look for other signs of scale rot and inspect them more often to play it safe.

How To Treat It

If you notice scale rot on your snake, you may be able to treat it at home. Many owners do this successfully (depending on how serious it is).

However, it's always best to consult with a veterinarian. Your snake may need antibiotics or debridement as part of their treatment.

Quarantine Your Snake

If you have more than one snake in the same enclosure, remove the one who has scale rot, and put it in a separate terrarium. Do not use substrate in the affected snake's enclosure. Use paper towels to line the bottom of the enclosure instead.

Treat The Affected Area

If your snake has scale rot, you can help them by gently cleaning the affected area. You can use a chlorhexidine solution or a trusted reptile wound solution to gently clean the affected scales twice each day.

Reptile Wound And Skin Care Solution

- Safely cleans wounds and other ailments
- Won't cause a painful sting or burn for your pet
- Recommended by veterinarians
- Manufactured under strict international guidelines in an FDA-registered facility

Alternatively, you can soak the affected scales in a diluted betadine solution. To make the betadine solution, mix one part betadine to three parts water. Soak your snake's scales in the solution for five minutes twice a day for one to two weeks. After each soaking, gently dry the scales with paper towels.

After drying the affected area, apply an over-the-counter triple antibiotic ointment, such as Neosporin. Do not purchase any antibiotic ointment with a pain-relieving agent.

If your snake's scale rot is more severe, your vet may need to prescribe a stronger antibiotic ointment for their treatment.

Clean The Enclosure

Lastly, perform a thorough cleaning of your snake's enclosure (and continue to do this regularly). Check the temperature and humidity levels in the enclosure at least once a day, and make adjustments if necessary.

If your snake's scale rot does not improve or gets worse within one week, contact your Lake Shore Pet Hospital veterinarian.