

Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis spp.*)

Difficulty: Easy

Kingsnakes are a terrestrial species of snake that can be found all over North America, but mostly in the United States and Mexico. Kingsnakes come in many different varieties (there are around 45 recognized subspecies!), so they can be found in a wide array of habitats, from tropical and subtropical broadleaf forests to deserts and xeric shrublands. Kingsnakes are known to be excellent climbers as well as swimmers, having adapted to conquer all kinds of terrain.

Kingsnakes range from 2' to 6' long, based on species and even subspecies. As for appearance, there are about as many different colors and patterns of kingsnake as there are subspecies! Some are red and yellow, some are gray and red, some are black, some are black and yellow, and some have more conservative patterns in gray and brown tones.

Kingsnakes are some of the most popular pet snakes in the United States, particularly the California kingsnake and Mexican black kingsnake. They're manageably-sized, fairly tolerant of being housed in sub-ideal conditions, and generally tolerate human interaction well, which makes them good pets for people who are new to snakes.

With good care, kingsnakes 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
- 3-4" 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 kingsnake grow to different lengths, so while 48”L x 24”W x 24”H is a good starting point, the actual minimum requirement for your particular kingsnake 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 kingsnakes be housed together?

Kingsnakes 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 kingsnakes are known to be ophiophagus (snake-eaters), it’s safest to house only one kingsnake per enclosure.

Lighting & UVB

As a general rule, lights should be on for 12 hours/day, but it's best to adjust according to your local sunrise/sunset times if possible in order to match seasonal cycles.

UVB Lighting

UVB lighting has also been proven to be beneficial to snakes’ health. So although kingsnakes can technically survive without UVB, we strongly recommend providing it in order to promote optimum welfare in captivity. Kingsnakes should have a basking UVI of 2.0-3.0, as measured by a Solarmeter 6.5.

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 kingsnake, basking distance depends on the UVB bulb and fixture you’re using:

Zoo Med T5 HO Reptisun 5.0 or Arcadia T5 HO Forest 6%

- With mesh obstruction: 9-12”
- Without mesh obstruction: 14-17”

Your UVB bulb should be long enough to span roughly half of the enclosure and placed on the warm side of the enclosure. Use an Arcadia ProT5 or Vivarium Electronics fixture for the most accurate results.

General Illumination

Kingsnakes are known to be active during both day and night, which means that providing bright illumination during the day is likely to be beneficial in stimulating activity and natural behaviors. You will need a nice bright 6500K LED or T5 HO fluorescent grow light, long enough to span most of the enclosure’s length. I prefer the Arcadia Jungle Dawn LED Bar and the Bio Dude Glow & Grow LED.

Heating

Humans are *warm-blooded*, which means that our body temperature is automatically regulated. Kingsnakes, however, are *cold-blooded*, which means that they have to move between areas of different temperatures in order to regulate their body temperature. Kingsnakes typically warm up by sleeping in warm patches of sunlight or warm burrows. In captivity, using halogen flood heating is the best way to replicate the type of warmth provided by sunlight.

- **Basking surface: 85-90°F (29-32°C)**
- **Cool side: 70-78°F (21-26°C)**

NOTE: Specific optimal basking temperatures may vary by which subspecies you're keeping. If your snake is basking for long periods of time daily, that's a sign that it may need warmer temps. If it's not basking at all and spending all of its time on the cool end, it likely needs cooler temps.

Generally speaking, 50w PAR38 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 kingsnake's coiled body. Two bulbs should be enough for an average kingsnake. 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

Kingsnakes 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

Kingsnakes 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 kingsnakes. 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. Provide a generous layer of clean leaf litter on top to help retain humidity and 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 kingsnake's 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!

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

The enclosure should be cluttered enough to provide plenty of climbing and hiding opportunities for the snake. There shouldn't be a lot of open space!

Food

Kingsnakes are carnivores, which means that they need a diet of whole animal prey in order to get the nutrition that their bodies need. Hatchling kingsnakes eat every 5-7 days. As they grow and get older, increase the size of the prey, keeping the prey only a little larger than the snake at its widest point (or roughly 10% of the snake's weight). By adulthood, the kingsnake should be eating every 10-14 days.

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 kingsnake 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.