



Feeder-rodent Supply chain issues:

Extended Advice for keepers

Background

- **There is likely to be a problem in the UK with the supply of dead rodents used as feed for pet snakes and other pet animals.**

Why is there a problem?

Some supplies of frozen rodents (mice and rats) have been found to contain *Salmonella* bacteria and this has been linked with cases of illness in people. Although it is common for both rodents and reptiles to carry salmonella the Food Standards Agency has taken the decision to instruct owners not to use any potentially infected rodents that they have purchased, and to return them to the shop that they bought them from. Retail shops have also been instructed to return any potentially infected stock that they have to their supplier. Import of the potentially infected stock will also no longer be allowed. These measures will cause a shortage as there are not sufficient extra rodents bred to replace the stock that cannot be sold.

- **It can be difficult to find alternative feed for snakes. Snake owners and others using frozen rodents as food for non-reptile species may be worried.**

What can I use as food if I can't get Mice or Rats?

Generally mice and rats are used to feed many pet snakes as they are specifically bred for this purpose and readily available. Many species will eat other food though and may take hamsters, gerbils, rabbits, multi-mammate mice or guinea pigs. If you are able to purchase alternative food then your snakes may feed on them. It is not recommended to trap wild rodents as food as these may have consumed poison, or carry diseases and parasites.

Other types of pets such as lizards, birds and mammals may also switch to alternative foods. This may be a different species of food animal, or a dry or prepared food.

- **The shortage should be short-term. There should be sufficient rodents to maintain animal welfare for all snakes and other animals, including birds, that need to be fed rodents, if owners adapt their current feeding routines.**

How long will the shortage last?

It's not easy to predict how long it will take for alternative supplies to be made available. It is expected however that it will take at least 3 months for supplies to return to normal.

What changes can I make to feeding my pet?

It may be possible to make changes to your feeding cycle depending on the species of animal you keep. This is easiest to do with snakes that are naturally periodic feeders. You can find more details about this later in this guidance sheet.



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Wholesalers and retailers

- **The shortages may mean that wholesalers and retailers will need to ration sales to avoid stockpiling, ensure fair allocation of feed and minimise potential welfare issues.**

Why will supplies need to be rationed?

When something is in short supply its natural for keepers and shops to try and buy as much stock as possible to try and make sure they don't run out. Unfortunately, if there is not enough stock available then this means that the people who buy the fastest, or who can afford to buy more, will receive all the stock they want whilst others get nothing at all. This is unfair, and also risks creating welfare issues as some people may have no food. To try and allocate food fairly then wholesalers and shops may choose to limit the amount each person can buy.

- **Please work with your normal supplier who will be best placed to provide the most up to date information that is available.**

How do I get up to date information?

Wholesalers will be updating their customers regularly. We recommend contacting them for the most up to date supply information

Keepers using rodents as part of a mixed diet for non-reptile species

- **We ask people who use rodents as part of a mixed diet for non-reptile species (such as zoos and those who keep birds of prey such as falcons) to use alternative food items for now where this can be done safely without adversely affecting animal welfare.**

What is meant by a mixed diet?

Many species of animals are fed rodents occasionally to provide variation in their diet, rather than the rodents forming the majority of their food. For these species it may be possible to stop feeding rodents altogether while there are shortages.

- **This should maintain adequate availability of food rodents to protect the welfare of snakes and the small number of other animals that are unable to accept any other feed.**

How will this help?

If some animals do not need to use rodents as their food then these can then be supplied to keepers of those species that must have rats and mice.



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Captive snakes

Extending feeding intervals

- **Almost all healthy normal captive snakes that are wholly dependent on rodent food can have increased intervals between feeds. The intervals can be twice as long as at present and this can continue for up to two months.**

If I feed less then will this make my snake ill?

Snakes are cold blooded, and are also adapted to feeding sporadically and large food items. They can often go long periods without food which should not cause any welfare concerns. In captivity most owners tend to follow a regular routine of feeding, maybe once a week or one every 2 weeks. For a healthy snake with a good body weight then feeding of this frequency is unnecessary and can be reduced. If you feed once a week then this could be extended to every 2 weeks. If you feed every 2 weeks then you might want to increase this to every 3 weeks.

Some owners may already feed sporadically with variable periods between feedings. For animals used to this type of feeding cycle then owners may want to just add 3 – 4 days onto each normal feeding date.

Hatchling snakes less than 3 months old should be kept on their normal feeding cycle. Once they are 3 months old and have started to feed well, and put on weight, then their feeding periods can be gradually extended over 4-6 weeks.

Large snakes, such as large species of Boas and Pythons, may be on a feeding cycle of 4-6 weeks, or even more. It is recommended that these species only have their feeding intervals increased by 50%.

It is expected that the shortage in supply will be around 40% lower than the normal numbers available. This means that with a reduction in the usage described above then there will be enough food for all of the pet snakes that need them.

- **Feeding should continue regularly with extended intervals between feeds rather than being stopped altogether.**

Wouldn't it be better to just not feed for a couple of months while there is a shortage?

Although snakes can go for long periods without food it is recommended to feed regularly, with a larger gap between feeding, rather than stop feeding for a long period and then starting again. This prevents potential welfare risks developing such as fatty liver.



Husbandry conditions

- Snake husbandry conditions, including their vivarium temperature range, should not be altered from normal.
- Reducing vivarium temperatures is more likely to result in immunosuppression and resulting illness than have any beneficial effects with reduced feeding.

If I lower the temperature in my vivarium then won't the snake need less food?

While this is correct it is not recommended to change the environmental conditions in a snake's home. Low temperature will reduce the metabolic process in the animal's body and this makes them susceptible to infections, such as respiratory infections, and general immunosuppression. If you NORMALLY hibernate your snakes and they have reached the required weight then this can continue as normal, but under no circumstances should snakes be force hibernated by rapidly dropping the temperature and in fact many species (such as Royal Pythons) are incapable of hibernation.

Avoid force feeding

- Force feeding of healthy snakes is **not recommended**, as this is stressful for snakes, risks injuries to both snakes and handlers, and can sometimes make snakes averse to feeding normally after this.

If I force feed then I could use something like dog food couldn't I?

Force feeding is an emergency medical intervention that is used when all other options have been tried. It is not an acceptable method to force an animal to eat food that it would not naturally eat. It is extremely unlikely that any snake will require this type of intervention, UNLESS there is a medical need. If in doubt then consult an experienced vet.

Seeking veterinary advice

- Snakes that are ill, currently on veterinary treatment, or emaciated should see a veterinary surgeon competent in dealing with reptiles if there is any doubt as to their being able to cope with a temporary reduction in feeding interval.
- Local veterinary surgeons prepared to treat reptiles can be found through [the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' "Find a Vet" function](#).

If you have ANY DOUBT about the health of your snake, either generally or as a result of the need to reduce feeding then you should consult a suitable experienced vet.

This document will be reviewed and updated as more information about feeder-rodent supply is known. Last updated 9 December 2021.