



Care of the Ball Python

With a variety of different color and pattern varieties currently bred in captivity, the ball python is a favorite among reptile hobbyists and herpetoculturists. Its moderate size (3-4ft at maturity), gentle disposition, and ease of care make the ball python well suited for the beginner and expert alike. The ball python, *Python regius*, is natively found in the grassland and savannah habitats of west-central Africa.

Selection

When selecting a pet, it is best to observe the snake from a distance before examining it more closely. If possible, watch the snake eat; this is especially important when purchasing a hatchling. A healthy ball python moves deliberately when held. The eyes should be bright and clear, and the tongue should flick actively. The skin should be shiny and free of wounds, lumps, and scars. The muscular body of the ball python resembles a loaf of bread in cross-section. The mouth should close firmly and lack evidence of wounds and discharge. Listen carefully as the snake breathes to assess for whistling, crackling, or gurgling, all signs of potential respiratory problems.

Housing

- Cages housing ball pythons must be **escape-proof** and constructed with smooth, waterproof sides and bottoms. Aquariums with latching or sliding lids, as well as many of the commercially available plastic cages, are suitable. Hatchlings may be kept in 10-gallon tanks or large plastic terraria. A single young adult ball python can be comfortably housed in a 20-gal long aquarium, although larger cages are preferred, especially as they become larger. Ball pythons should be housed singly when not paired for breeding. Separation allows the keeper to more closely monitor the behavior and health of each specimen.
- The cage floor should be covered with a material that allows for burrowing and easy spot removal of wastes. Newspaper, AstroTurf, processed paper pulp, cypress mulch, and aspen shavings can all be used with success. A hide box or shelter is required as ball pythons are very secretive and prefer hiding places for much of the day. Inverted plant saucers with entry holes, toilet paper tubes, hollow or concave wood or bark slabs, and many other products manufactured for this purpose can serve as hide boxes. Ideally, a hiding area would be available on the warm and the cool side of the enclosure.
- A broad bowl filled with clean, fresh water must be provided. Because they naturally live in humid areas, ball pythons **require more humidity** than is found in most homes for adequate hydration and normal shedding. Increased hydration can be achieved with misting the aquarium every 1-2 days, providing soaking opportunities, or supplying a humidity box. Humidity boxes can be purchased at the pet store or can be made from old Tupperware

containers. The substrate of the humidity box should be material that can hold onto moisture such as cloth or sterilized peat moss. The humidity box should be checked 2-3 times weekly to see if additional water must be added.

- Ball pythons fare well in a temperature range of **75 - 90°F**. During the day, one end of the cage should be kept at the lower end of this range and the other should provide a **focal hot spot at 90°F**. At night, the enclosure should never drop below 75°F. Providing such a thermal gradient allows snakes to regulate their body temperature precisely. Heating elements to provide this heat can utilize over tank heat lamps (recommended) and undertank heaters, however, undertank heaters can heat the glass excessively and harm your snake, thus ensuring that the substrate is thick enough to ensure that your snake will not be burnt is important. Heat rocks are NEVER recommended as they can burn and harm your snake.
- It is somewhat controversial whether or not snakes require a source of UVB light for proper vitamin D metabolism and calcium absorption. However, a recent scientific study has shown that snakes exposed to UVB light have higher vitamin D levels than those not exposed. Therefore, we recommend the use of a UVB light for snakes. The UVB output of these bulbs decrease overtime, even if they are still emitting light, therefore, they should be **replaced every 6 months**.

Ball Python Diet

Ball pythons are strict carnivores that kill their prey by constriction prior to ingestion. The diet of wild ball pythons includes lizards, frogs, rodents, birds, and bird eggs. In captivity, most hatchlings accept live or thawed frozen nestling ("pinkie") mice. Captive adult ball pythons, with few exceptions, readily accept pre-killed or thawed frozen mice and rats of appropriate size. **Feeding pre-killed prey is preferred to prevent dangerous wounds to the snake.** If live prey is to be fed, it should never be left in the cage unobserved; a snake that is not hungry can be killed by its intended prey.

Frozen rodents should be sealed in a plastic bag and thawed rapidly in hot water. Feed only high-quality rodents; malnourished prey animals are likely to pass nutritional deficiencies along to the predator. Supplementation with vitamins and minerals is generally unnecessary when whole prey is being fed to carnivores such as ball pythons.

Snakes housed on a particulate substrate should be moved to a bare feeding enclosure to prevent ingestion of the ground medium. **Rapidly growing hatchling and juvenile ball pythons should be fed every five to seven days. Mature adults may be fed weekly to monthly.**

Preventive Health Care and Diseases

It is critical that you learn as much as possible about any reptile pet before obtaining one. Research the specific needs of ball pythons using periodicals, books, on-line resources, and the advice of experienced reptile breeders and veterinarians. A qualified reptile veterinarian should perform a post-purchase health exam shortly after your new pet arrives. This office visit should include a thorough physical exam, a fecal analysis to check for internal parasites, and counseling on proper

husbandry and diet. Having your veterinarian perform an annual physical examination throughout your snake's life can aid in the early detection and correction of both husbandry and medical problems. Careful attention to environmental conditions such as temperature and humidity will help minimize the risk of your pet becoming sick.

Seek the assistance of a veterinarian skilled in reptile care if any of the following symptoms are observed:

- Refusal to feed for two or more consecutive scheduled feedings
- Failure to produce stool within seven to ten days after feeding
- Difficulty shedding, retained spectacles "eye caps"
- Abdominal swelling
- Regurgitation (vomiting)
- Diarrhea or foul-smelling stool; straining to pass stool
- Open-mouthed breathing, difficulty breathing
- Discharge from the eyes, nostrils, or mouth
- Weakness, lethargy, depression, or inactivity
- Lumps, bumps, scabs, or cuts on the skin

