

Basic Information on Ball Pythons



Originally from West Africa, ball pythons (*Python regius*) are more accurately known as the Royal Python. In the United States we call them "balls" because they are very shy and curl themselves into a ball when they are nervous. Ball pythons are also known for their remarkable patterns of gold, ebony, and bronze. They are a docile snake, rarely known to bite. However, they may be aggressive during breeding season. Like all pythons, balls have anal spurs located on either side of the vent. Males have longer spurs than females. Males may also have smaller heads than females. Either sex are good pets.

Choosing a pet

When possible, purchase captive-born snakes. Buying a captive-born ball python reduces the stress on the threatened populations in the wild and helps ensure a healthy, established eater. Ball pythons devour a variety of prey, but they do not eat mice in the wild. Because of this, a wild caught snake may go extended periods without food. Wild caught snakes may also harbor a variety of parasites. It is always better to buy a captive-born hatchling or an established, well-feeding juvenile, sub-adult or adult than an imported ball of any age.

If only imported snakes are available, take the snake to a good vet and have it checked and treated for parasites.

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, a rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes, and who actively flicks its tongue when handled. All balls are naturally shy about having their heads touched and will pull away from reaching hands. When held, the snake should grip firmly and be alert to its surroundings. Since all young snakes are food for other snakes, birds, etc. your snake may be a bit nervous at first, but should soon settle down.

In captivity, a young ball will grow about a foot a year for the first three years. Males grow to an average of 3.5 feet, and females grow 4 – 5 feet. They will reach sexual maturity in three to five years. The average life span is 20 years, but they can live longer. The longest living ball python on record was over 48 years old when it died!

Housing

For younger snakes, a standard 10 gallon tank is

adequate. For snakes 3 foot and above a 20 gallon long tank is adequate – but the bigger the better. Do not buy a tank that is tall – floor space is what your snake needs.

Since snakes get their vitamin D from their prey, they do not require full spectrum lighting. Also since they are nocturnal they do not require any visible lighting. Because of their heat requirements, an incandescent red bulb or "black light" bulb in a reflective dome fixture aimed at a flat rock in the cage, provides a warm basking spot. You may also place an "under tank heater" on the same spot for added heat. Make sure the temperature of the area is not too hot. All pythons are susceptible to thermal burns. Make sure all bulbs are screened off and the snake cannot reach them. We also sell ceramic heat emitters. They radiate heat downwards and do not emit light. Make sure an "easy to read" broad range thermometer is always visible. Check the heat daily to make sure it stays constant with the changing seasons.

Ball pythons require 85° average daily temperature with a 90° - to 95° basking spot. A nighttime temperature of 75° to 80° is required.

Substrate

Aspen bedding or Carefresh® Bedding are both great for snakes. We do not recommend newspaper, as the print may rub off onto the snake.

Handling The Snake

After giving the snake a few days to settle in, begin by picking up the snake gently. He may move away from you, hiss, or lash his tail. This is **usually** a bluff - do not be put off by it. Be gentle but persistent. When the snake becomes comfortable you may take it to other parts of the house. Be Careful! If you sit on a couch your snake might slide off into the cushions to points unknown and inaccessible. Always be gentle and avoid sudden movements. If the snake wraps around your neck or arm remove it by grasping the tail and unwinding slowly.

Some snakes are a bit sensitive after they eat. They may

still be in a hunting mode and strike, or they may become upset and regurgitate the mouse. Wait a few days until the food is digested before handling.

Diet

Young snakes (1 – 3 years) need a small rodent once a week. Snakes older than 4 years need a rodent once every two weeks. This will help prevent obesity.

Feeding Tips:

1. ALWAYS – ALWAYS wash your hands before and after handling any of your snakes. A gentle snake will strike a hand that smells of his dinner (rodent).
2. Do not feed the snake in its enclosure. It may get confused and think any time the cage opens it is dinner time! Take the snake out of the cage to feed. We recommend a large brown paper grocery bag or a secure box. Ball pythons prefer to eat at night and use the heat pits on their face to sense prey. Place the prey in the bag or box and stay there while the snake eats. DO NOT walk away – the snake may escape! If the snake does not strike the prey within 15 minutes, return the snake to its enclosure and put the prey in a secure cage with food and water. Try again the next night.
3. Always use hemostats or tongs to offer food to your snake. NEVER offer thawed or pre-killed prey with your hand – snakes strike quickly and you could get bitten.
4. Always use a cloth towel to move snakes back to their enclosure. They may still be in a hunting mode after feeding and may strike at your hand thinking it is a mouse.

Water

Always keep a fresh bowl of water available. Your snake will drink, soak, and defecate in it. Change it daily.

Shedding

Snakes do not need active grooming. The only exception is shedding time. Since snakes outgrow their skins, they need to shed before they can grow. They will use any rough surface to rub the dead skin off of their bodies. Usually the shed will be in one or two pieces, but occasionally pieces will stick to the snake and require your help for removal.

Soaking is especially good right before a shed. When the snake's eyes become milky opaque, soak it in a tub of warm water for ten minutes, lightly dry and return it to its enclosure. The snake should shed within 24 hours. During a shed do not expect your snake to eat. After the shed is complete the snake will be very hungry. Feed it as soon as possible.

Make sure the eye shed (spectacles) are clearly seen in the shed. If not, try soaking the snake again. The humidity should cause the spectacles to loosen. If they do not fall off in 24 hours you should contact your vet.

If a snake does not shed cleanly, it is a sign that the snake may have health problems or his environment may lack

humidity. Newly acquired snakes may have problem sheds for one or two months. This is stress. But if problem sheds occur or continue in an established snake – consult your vet!

Be careful not to provide too much humidity. Ball pythons come from a *dry*, warm area of Africa. They do not need to be misted or kept with damp moss. A water bowl is usually all your snake needs.

Decorations

Since ball pythons are basically a burrowing type, they do not need decorations to crawl up on. They are nocturnal and do appreciate a hiding box. Make sure to replace the box as the snake grows. His box is his security and helps reduce stress.

Cage Cleaning

Since snakes are very low maintenance animals, the maintenance that they do need is essential. Wash the water dish daily. This will prevent unwanted bacterial growth. We recommend scrubbing his enclosure once every two weeks. Empty the enclosure of all substrate and disinfect with a mild bleach solution. We recommend 1 part bleach to 10 parts water. Not only will this kill bacteria but it will also kill any mites that might be clinging to the enclosure.

A snake defecates rarely. Remove the waste and the surrounding substrate immediately upon discovery.

Cage placement

Snakes are not social animals. We recommend placing the cage in a room that is quiet and without loud noises. This will help him feel more secure.

Never use aerosol products around any animal. This includes perfumes, hairsprays, room deodorizers, spray paint, strong cleaners, etc.

Veterinary Care

Become familiar with the vets in your area that treat reptiles and other exotics. You may wish to schedule a check up for your newly acquired snake (especially if he is imported). Speak to your vet and ask their recommendations. Always have their number ready in case of an emergency.

Please Note: The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only. There are several good books available on the care and maintenance of ball pythons.