

The ball python (Python regius), or royal python, is a small, attractive and gentle snake native to western and west-central Africa. These nocturnal pythons prefer mixed grassland and trees (savannah) as their habitat. During daylight hours they hide underground in rodent burrows.

In captivity, this behavior is interpreted as secretive. When they are frightened, they coil up into a ball—thus, the name “ball python.”

Free-ranging ball pythons are considered a threatened species, resulting from habitat destruction and collection for the pet trade, skin trade, and as a food item.

Permits are required for their exportation from Africa.

Ball pythons can be relatively expensive pets to maintain because of their requirements for a large enclosure, special heating elements to regulate temperature, and live prey items for food.

Zoological Education Network provides educational materials about exotic companion animals.

Most Common Disorders of Ball Pythons

- Loss of appetite
- Intestinal parasites
- Skin problems
- Respiratory disease
- Mouth rot
- External parasites (mites and ticks)
- Dysecdysis (retained skin shed, retained eye spectacles)
- Obstipation/constipation
- Bite wounds from prey
- Dystocia/retained eggs
- Inclusion body disease
- Rectal/colon or uterine prolapse
- Spinal fractures/trauma/thermal burns

Ball pythons can flourish as long-lived pets when attention is given to certain aspects of husbandry, including temperature and humidity. Regular visits to your reptile veterinarian should be scheduled to check for parasites and other early signs of disease and to promote a long, satisfying relationship with your ball python. For help in finding a reptile veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (ARAV) by visiting www.ARAV.org and click on “Membership Directory.”

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BALL PYTHONS



Companion Reptile Care
S E R I E S

What to Expect from Your Ball Python

Snakes do not respond to their owners like dogs and cats do and generally prefer to be left alone. Ball pythons are exceptionally shy. Because they are small and docile, they may appear to be a good beginner snake; however, the new ball python owner

must be prepared to deal with potential feeding problems, parasites and secondary health problems. The beginner should acquire only young captive-bred specimens or imported specimens that are proven eaters. A frightened snake may lash with its tail, hiss, or in rare cases, bite.

Vital Statistics

Body length (adults): 36-48 inches
(90-120 cm)

Body weight: age and length dependent

Age of sexual maturity: 3-5 years

Maximum life span: 30-40 years

Average captive life span: 20-30 years

Is Your Ball Python Male or Female?

Ball pythons are difficult to sex. Usually the males have thicker tails, and the anal spurs are more curved. A reptile veterinarian may use a probe to determine your snake's gender.

Housing Recommendations

Housing should be an escape-proof enclosure that is the appropriate size for the snake. Hatchlings require at least a 10 gallon tank (50 x 25 cm); young adults a 20 gallon tank (60 x 31 cm) and large adults need a 30 gallon tank (90 x 31 cm). The best type of enclosure is one specifically designed for housing snakes, which includes a fixed screen/hinged glass top. A dark, secure hiding box inside the enclosure at the cool end is mandatory for a sense of security. Because ball pythons are nocturnal, UVB sources are not necessary.

Temperature and Humidity

Proper temperature regulation is even more important than the physical enclosure in maintaining a healthy snake. Room temperature is not adequate for the digestive process and health of the snake. Heat may

be provided by special reptile heating pads or incandescent light bulbs in reflector hoods, placed to avoid direct contact with the snake. One end of the enclosure should be maintained at a higher temperature for basking.

Proper humidity levels help ensure successful sheds for your snake. Although the ideal humidity of the enclosure should be between 60 and 80%, this is difficult to maintain in a dry climate. An alternative is to provide a shedding box (eg, Tupperware® container with the two opposite corners cut out for entry and exit). Damp sphagnum moss placed in the box maintains an agreeably moist environment. Young growing snakes shed approximately every 4-6 weeks; adults shed several times a year.

What and When to Feed Your Snake

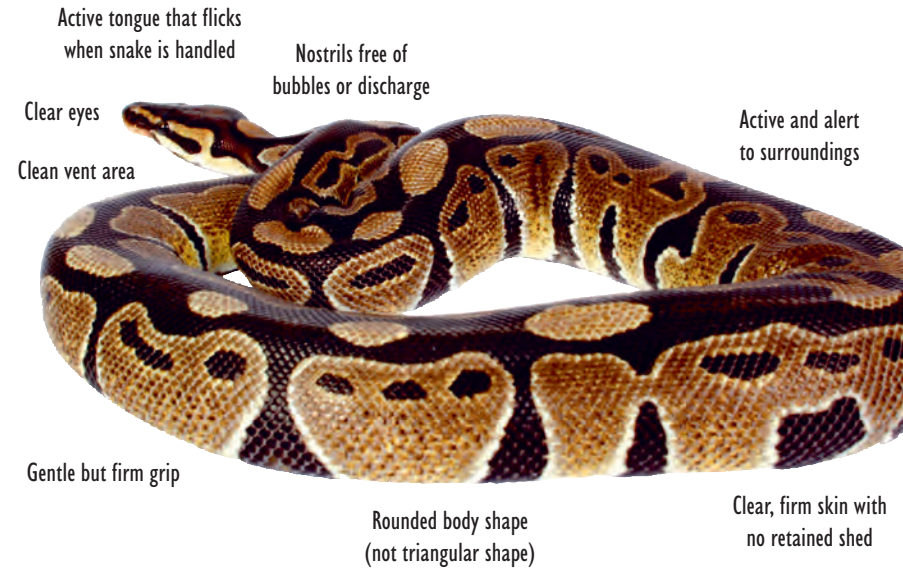
Ball pythons are fed at night. They are fed every 7-10 days for the first 2-3 years and every 2-3 weeks thereafter. A prey item appropriate for the size of the snake should be fed at each meal. Ball pythons are constrictors—that is, they coil around their prey and suffocate it. Only stunned or pre-killed prey should be offered to avoid injury to the snake.

Gerbils are the initial prey of choice, although dark-colored mice or hamsters might work as prey items in a reluctant eater. Some snakes do not recognize red-eyed white mice as a food item. Rubbing mice with a gerbil can impart the scent of the gerbil to the mouse and aid in converting the snake to a mouse diet. As your snake gets larger, small rats are ideal. Adding nutritional supplements, such as HEALx Sunshine Factor,* to the prey's diet may be beneficial.

Frequency of defecation depends on food consumption and age but should occur at least 1-2 times per month.

*www.HarrisonsPetProducts.com

What Your Veterinarian Looks for in a Healthy Ball Python



How to Keep Your Ball Python Healthy, Happy and Safe!

- ✓ Buy from a reputable breeder because a young, captive-bred ball python is less stressed and more willing to eat than a frightened, wild-caught snake.
- ✓ Take your new ball python to a reptile veterinarian for a general health exam and test for parasites.
- ✓ Leave a newly purchased snake alone in its enclosure for 1-2 weeks to acclimate to its new home.
- ✓ Provide heat to your snake by special reptile heating pads or incandescent light bulbs in reflector hoods; the use of "hot rocks" in the snake's enclosure should be avoided.
- ✓ Interact with your ball python during the evening hours when it is becoming active.
- ✓ Use a pillowcase as a transport container for short trips.
- Housing for your ball python should:
 - ✓ be a relatively large enclosure
 - ✓ maintain ambient daytime temperatures of 80-85°F (27-29°C)
 - ✓ provide for a basking area of 90-94°F (32-34°C)
 - ✓ have access to fresh water in a bowl that is large enough for the snake to soak
 - ✓ maintain high relative humidity (60-80%); a large plastic container with moist sphagnum moss may help proper shedding
 - ✓ include suitable substrates that are easy to clean: newspaper, paper towels, indoor-outdoor carpet, Astroturf®
 - ✓ provide a climbing branch with greenery for basking
 - ✓ be escape-proof
- It is important for ball pythons to avoid:
 - ✗ live prey that may injure them
 - ✗ normal household temperatures (cooler than 75°F [24°C])
 - ✗ unsuitable substrates such as cedar, corncob, wood chips/shavings, gravel, dirt or rocks
 - ✗ "hot rocks," which are considered a potential hazard
 - ✗ direct contact with heating elements
 - ✗ soiled water bowl
 - ✗ cats, dogs, other pets
 - ✗ unsupervised children