

# HOW TO KEEP YOUR BALL PYTHON HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE!



## Always

- 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 to 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 active.
- Use a pillowcase or locking Tupperware container 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 90-92°F (32-33.3°C).
- provide hide boxes.
- 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 paper towels or sphagnum moss may help ensure complete 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".
- direct contact with heating elements.
- soiled water bowl.
- cats, dogs and other pets.
- unsupervised children.



## Most Common Disorders of Ball Pythons

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
- Rectal/colon or uterine prolapse
- 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](http://www.ARAV.org) and click on "Find a Vet" or contact the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, [www.ABVP.com/diplomate](http://www.ABVP.com/diplomate).

## Suggested Reading:

*The Ball Python Manual*, by Philippe de Vosjoli, Dave and Tracy Barker, and Roger Klingenberg.

*The Art of Keeping Snakes* Philippe De Vosjoli

*The New Encyclopedia of Snakes* Christopher Mattison

*Living Snakes of the World* John M. Meriartens

*Ball Pythons: Habitat, Care, and Breeding* Stefan Broghammer

*The Complete Ball Python: A Comprehensive Guide to Care, Breeding, and Genetic Mutations* Kevin McCurley

*Ball Pythons: A Complete Guide to Regius* Colette Sutherland

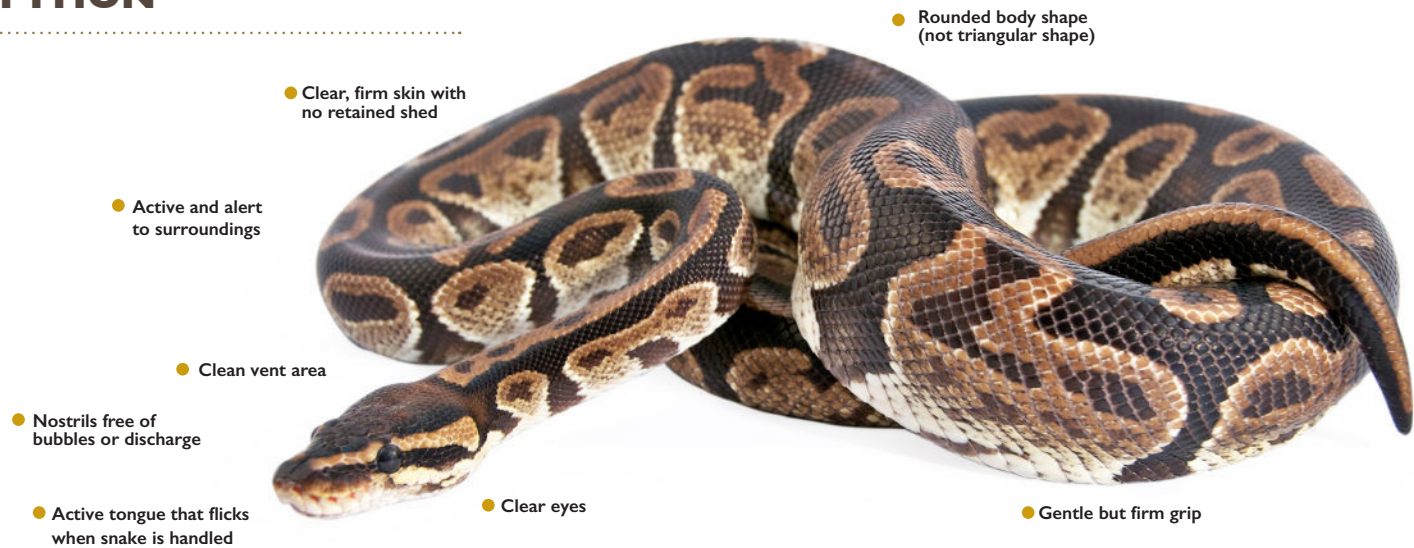
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# WHAT YOUR VETERINARIAN LOOKS FOR IN A HEALTHY BALL PYTHON



## 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



**NOTE:** Most, if not all, reptiles carry *Salmonella* bacteria in their intestinal tract and intermittently or continuously shed these bacteria in their feces, so they are unsuitable pets for very young children and those with compromised immune systems. Good hygiene must always be practiced around all reptiles, including Ball Pythons. For more information, please see the handout, *Salmonella Information for Reptile Owners* at <http://arav.org/salmonella-bacteria-reptiles>.

## BALL PYTHON

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.

### 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 that are proven eaters. A frightened snake may lash with its tail, hiss or in rare cases, bite.

### Is Your Ball Python a 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 sex.

### 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 weeks thereafter. A prey item appropriate for the size of the snake should be fed at each meal (no larger than the girth of the snake at mid-body). Ball pythons are constrictors—that is, they coil around their prey and suffocate it. Only stunned or pre-killed (frozen/thawed) prey should be offered to avoid injury to the snake.

Young mice are a good starter prey item, beginning with fuzzies and working up to hoppers and then adults. As your snake gets larger, small rats are ideal.

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

### 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 minimum length of the tank should be at least 2/3rds the snake's body length. 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 both ends are mandatory so the snake

does not have to decide between warmth and security. Because ball pythons are nocturnal, UVB sources are not necessary. Snakes are not social animals, and should never be housed together as this will cause them considerable stress.

### 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. The cool end of the enclosure should not drop below 75 degrees °F (23.8 degrees °C), while the warm end should fall into a range between 80-85°F (27-29°C).

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 or dampened paper towels placed in the box help maintain a moist environment. Young growing snakes shed approximately every 4-6 weeks; adults shed several times a year.