

# Caring for Ball Pythons

Ball pythons are among the most popular pet snakes. They are a good pet for first-time snake owners because they are docile and easy to care for. Housing for a ball python can vary from simple to elaborate. What's most important is that you follow the guidelines for care and check your snake often to ensure that he or she looks and acts healthy.

### Biological Facts

- The ball python (*Python regius*), a nonvenomous constrictor, is also known as the *royal python*.
- The ball python is the smallest African python, and its natural habitat is savannah, grassland, and sparsely wooded areas.
- Size: 3 to 4 ft (91 to 122 cm) in length, rarely exceeds 5 ft (152 cm) in length
- Average adult weight: 3 to 4 lb (1360 to 1814 g), can exceed 7 lb (3175 g)
- Life span: 20 to 30 years of age with proper care

### Behavior

- Ball pythons are shy. They coil around their head and into a ball when frightened.
- They are crepuscular (active around dawn and dusk).
- In the wild, they rest during the day in underground burrows; in captivity, they need one or more hide boxes to prevent stress.
- Wild-caught ball pythons can be finicky eaters, occasionally going several months without a meal. This is not a healthy trait and should be investigated if significant weight loss occurs.
- Buying a captive-born ball python helps ensure you will get a healthy eater and a snake used to contact with humans.

### Diet

- Young snakes typically eat baby mice and rats (called *pinkies*, *fuzzies*, or *hoppers*).
- Adult snakes consume adult mice and small rats; the size of the prey should approximate

the width of the snake at the largest part of his or her body.

- Live prey can bite and scratch the snake, causing severe damage and even death, regardless of the snake's size. Never leave a live rodent unsupervised, or even supervised for longer than 5 to 10 minutes, with your snake.
- Frozen-thawed mice and rats are safer and less expensive, as they can be bought in bulk and are stored more easily than live rodents. Frozen rodents can be purchased online and at most pet stores.
- Fresh water should be provided daily.

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### Environment

- The enclosure must be clean, well ventilated, and free of sharp edges or points. There must be adequate room for your snake to move around (a 30-gallon [113.5 L] glass aquarium is suitable for most adult ball pythons).
- The enclosure should have a cool end that is 80°F to 85°F (26.7°C to 29.4°C) and a warm end that is 90°F to 95°F (32.2°C to 35°C) so that your snake can thermoregulate (control his or her temperature).
- Under-tank heating pads or ceramic heat emitters are preferred; avoid hot rocks or direct contact with heat sources of any kind because they can cause severe burns.
- Humidity should be maintained at 50% to 60% through regular misting of the cage, covering a portion of the cage top, and placing an aquarium air stone in the water bowl.

## Caring for Your New Pet

- To minimize your snake's stress, provide two hide boxes—one at the warm end of the enclosure, and another at the cool end. The design of the hide boxes should allow you to easily remove your snake, if necessary.
- Newspaper, paper towels, and reptile carpeting are highly recommended as bedding. Natural beddings, such as aspen shavings, coconut fiber, and pine bark, are more visually appealing but can cause problems if they are eaten; cedar and pine shavings should be avoided because they can irritate a snake's respiratory tract.
- Monitoring is best done using a reptile thermometer and humidity gauge, which are more accurate than rainbow aquarium stickers.

### Preventive Care

- A complete physical examination should be performed every 6 to 12 months. Consult a veterinarian with experience treating reptiles if you have any questions or concerns about your snake's health.
- An annual fecal examination should be performed to check for parasites, especially if live prey is fed to the snake.
- Ticks and mites are best treated by a veterinarian experienced with exotics.

### Common Medical Disorders

- Respiratory infection
- Prey-induced trauma
- Anorexia
- Parasites
- Burns
- Infection of the oral cavity (mouth rot)
- Retained shedding