Aurora ANIMAL + HOSPITAL
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Ball Python Care

Please note these care sheets are intended for the average reptile owner to ensure that your pet is receiving basic care needed to have a healthy life and there are other aspects of advanced care that can be considered for healthy pets.

Brief Description



Ball pythons *(Python regius)* are very popular pet snakes due to their small size and generally friendly nature. Despite being easily bred in captivity most pet stores still sell wild caught young ball pythons imported to the US from their native range in Africa. Captive breeding has produced a wide range of coloration patterns such as pastel, mojave, pinstripe, spider, enchi, lesser bee, etc. Adults can get up to 5 feet in length.

Lifespan

With good care the expected lifespan is 20-35 years on average.

Sexing

The most common way to determine gender of snakes is to have them probed, where the hemipene pocket length is measured to determine if it male or female. Males will have much deeper pockets than females (this should be done by someone experienced with probing).

Caging

Ball python enclosures can range from very simple to very elaborate. Ideally your snake should have enough room to stretch the entire length of its body straight without touching the ends, however many snakes tend to do well in smaller habitats like 40-50 gallon tanks. Sweater boxes are also used successfully with an under-tank-heater to maintain a temperature gradient but offer minimal enrichment. The lid of the enclosure needs to be secure as snakes can stretch to the top of even tall tanks and forcibly push a lid off. The cage should contain at least two hides that have only one opening (not the half logs) and allow the snake to fit snugly within it. Lack of appropriate hides will cause stress. Only one ball python should be kept per cage.

Substrate

There are a variety of options. Newspaper, paper towels or artificial turf like reptile carpet can be used for minimal mess and clean up as long as multiple hides are provided. Aspen shavings, mulch, and soil allow burrowing but are more difficult to clean and can harbor mold or bacterial growth if not cleaned regularly. Sand and cedar or pine shavings should be avoided.

Lighting and Temperature

Reptiles are ectotherms (cold-blooded), meaning they need to absorb heat from their environment to regulate their own body heat since they cannot produce it. The basking spot should be around **85-90 degrees** at the level of the basking spot and the cooler end of the cage should be kept around **75-80 degrees**. A thermometer should be placed at the same level of the pet in the basking area to accurately measure temperatures. Lights should be on for 10-12 hours each day and then total darkness at night. Night temperatures can safely drop to 65 degrees so a night time heat source is not necessary in most homes. Most snakes do not require UVB lighting, however there is emerging evidence that they may benefit from it. Providing UVB should be considered.

Water

A shallow water dish with fresh water at least big enough for your whole snake's body to fit in curled up should be available at all times. It should be stable, so it cannot be spilled, and it should be easy to climb in and out of from all sides. Dog food dishes can work well, and there are many dishes made for snakes. Snakes enjoy full body soakings but often defecate in their water so it needs to be cleaned often.

Humidity

Humidity in the enclosure should be 50-60% and should be monitored by a hygrometer. Inadequate humidity will affect your reptile's ability to shed its skin properly and other potentially serious health problems. A humidifier on a timer is often needed to maintain appropriate levels, especially in dry climates. Mesh tops can be partially covered with foil to retain humidity and reduce fire hazard risks near heat lamps.

Food
Ball pythons only eat rodents as their food source. Young ball pythons should be fed once weekly, whereas adults can be fed every other week. Appropriately sized prey should be no bigger in circumference than the ball python at its largest circumference. Feeding thawed frozen prey is preferred as offering live prey can lead to a more aggressive snake and potential injury to the snake that can be very severe. Frozen prey should be warmed basically to body temperature (98-99 degrees) to stimulate your snake to eat it. Thawing prey in hot water is preferable. Do not microwave prey.
Younger snakes (16-30 inches, or less than 3 years old) that are still growing fast should be fed about once a week. Rat pups or mouse hoppers are generally a good size for younger snakes, although smaller may be needed for hatchlings. Older snakes (30-48 inches or over 3 years old) won't need to feed as often and can be fed once every 2-3 weeks. Small to medium rats are often appropriate size for adult snakes. Some sources will suggest feeding more often, but many captive snakes often become obese. Snakes in the wild don't have the opportunity to become obese due to less food availability, and more activity hunting for it. A good rule of thumb when selecting prey sizes is to choose a prey item that is either the same size or just a little smaller around in diameter than the largest portion of the snake.

Quarantine
Always quarantine a new snake in a separate room from your collection for at least 3 months to reduce risk of transmissible diseases and infections. Do not share cage furnishings, water bowls, substrate, feeding tongs, etc. with the rest of your collection and handle the new snake AFTER the rest of your collection. If the new snake shows no signs of illness after the quarantine period it can be added to the collection with minimized risk, although some snakes can harbor illnesses without showing clinical signs.
Read more about proper quarantine procedures on our website.

Respiratory Infections
Unfortunately, respiratory infections are very common in ball pythons and can be caused by bacteria and/or many viruses that are contagious. Possible signs of infection are wheezing or clicking with breathing noises, bubbles from the nose or mouth, frequent yawning or open mouth breathing, holding head pointed upwards while resting, getting substrate stuck in the mouth, and not eating. Not all signs need to be present to be consistent with respiratory infection. Since so many infections are viral in origin the treatment with antibiotics is not always successful.

Not Eating
It is relatively frequent that snakes (ball pythons especially) suddenly refuse to eat, or go on a "hunger strike". This can be a frustrating problem that can persist for weeks to months and depending on the cause may or may not be a major health concern. It is not uncommon for ball pythons to stop eating during certain times of the year, generally in the winter months, or during a shed. This is typically nothing to worry about with healthy, well-established pythons, although it can be extremely frustrating to the owner. Continue to offer prey every few weeks, review and optimize husbandry, and reduce handling until it is interested in eating again, as the snake will eventually resume feeding normally. If weight loss or any other health problems are observed then seek veterinary care.