

BALL/ ROYAL PYTHON CARE SHEET

(*Python regius*)

The ball python a small, heavy bodied species native to western and north-central Africa (Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, and Liberia eastward to Sudan and northwestern Uganda). Ball pythons derive their name from their tendency to coil into a tight ball with their heads in the center when threatened. Sometimes referred to as the royal python in Europe, this species is a popular choice due to its small size and placid disposition. Captive-born specimens typically lack many of the feeding issues and parasite loads that wild-caught balls are known for. Captive-bred and born Ball pythons are also available in a huge array of color and pattern morphs attained through selective breeding. There are well over one hundred such morphs and variants, with new ones being discovered or produced every year by top breeders across the US.

Overall Difficulty Level: Novice

Provided a captive bred and born, well established animal is acquired, ball pythons can make for excellent starter snakes for the beginning reptile enthusiast and reach relatively small adult sizes. A general knowledge and understanding of reptile, and more specifically, snake husbandry is needed before acquiring a ball python. Given the proper care, ball pythons can attain longevity of 20-30 years in captivity, sometimes longer.

Ball python Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: Python

Species Epithet: *Python regius*

Size and Description

Ball python hatchlings are usually around 10" in length. Adult ball pythons range from about 36 to 60" (or about 3 to 5' in length). A normal ball python is a small, heavy bodied python that is black to dark brown in color with a variable number of large brown to yellowish brown loaf and oval shaped lateral blotches. There are two yellowish stripes bordered in black running from the nostrils to the neck on an otherwise unmarked brownish colored head. Like most pythons, there are heat sensitive labial pits present.

Temperament and Handling

Ball pythons, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. Normally, ball pythons are docile snakes that coil into a tight ball (hence the name) when startled. However, the occasional hatchling or juvenile may be nippy, and exhibit coiling and striking. With patience and gentle handling, most ball pythons will become more docile and can be worked with more easily. It should be kept in mind however that even a supposedly docile snake may bite or react defensively if suddenly startled or frightened or when food is detected (resulting in a feeding response bite).

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. Hatchling to juvenile ball pythons can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile ball pythons can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes melted or punched in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Rack systems are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape either installed along the back wall of the rack as back heat or on the rear half of the floor of each slot as belly heat, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Adult ball pythons can be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium or similar sized commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors if one chooses. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable, and temperature and humidity can be relatively easy to control within them. Many of these types of enclosures are also available with built in heating and lighting elements as well. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (28-32 quarts for adult males, and up to 41 quarts or similar size for adult females), as previously described.

A hide-box for allowing the snake to retreat from view is recommended as part of a terrarium setup as well. Besides commercially available hide boxes, you could modify many things to serve as a hide box. They can include opaque plastic storage container, plastic litter pans for cats, and inverted flowerpots for example. A water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once weekly or sooner if fouled. The dish should be heavy enough so that it isn't easily tipped over (plastic or ceramic crock dishes work well). It should also be cleaned and disinfected periodically.

Temperature and Heating

As with all reptiles, ball pythons are ectothermic animals, meaning it is important to provide them with an external heat source and thermal gradient for proper digestion and gestation. There should be a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. To create the warm side, you can use an under tank heater (UTH), Flexwatt heat tape, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure. Many commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side remain around 87-90 degrees Fahrenheit. It is also important to disallow any snake to come into direct contact with any heating element, as thermal burns can result, and can sometimes be severe, requiring professional veterinary attention. UV or other overhead lighting is not required for most species of snakes, particularly primarily nocturnal species such as ball pythons.

Substrate

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, or coconut husk fibers are all acceptable substrates for ball pythons. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. The substrate should be kept dry and be spot cleaned when needed to reduce the likelihood of bacterial outbreaks. A complete substrate change and replacement should be done periodically as well, with that interval depending on the substrate being used.

Feeding and Diet

As with all pythons and boas, ball pythons are nonvenomous constrictors. In their native range, ball pythons will consume rodents and other small mammals (such as gerbils), and the occasional small ground nesting bird.

Neonate ball pythons can be started off once every five to seven days on hopper mice or rat pinkies. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adult ball pythons can be offered small to medium adult rats every five to seven days. It is important to not to overfeed your ball python, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.