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The Captive Care Guide to Healthy Ball Pythons (*Python Regius*)

Ball pythons are perhaps the most popular snakes bought at pet stores. They are relatively inexpensive, are beautifully marked, have a friendly disposition, and generally do not grow to more than four feet in length. As pets, they generally grow about a foot a year during their first 3-4 years. They can easily be identified by the brown, black, and tan markings. With a good imagination, you may see a tan profile of “E.T.” on the side of the snake.

Pythons have anal spurs along either side of their vent. These represent vestigial legs that were lost in the evolution of snakes. Males have longer spurs than females. Ball pythons reach sexual maturity at 3-5 years of age. Female ball pythons can lay 4-10 eggs per clutch and will incubate them for approximately three months. During this time, the female typically will not be interested in eating. Ball pythons can live for 20-30 years. These snakes have heat pits along the upper jaw. These pits are used to sense body heat, allowing the snake to hone in on their prey.

To properly care for any animal, it is important to know their natural habitat. Ball pythons come from West-Central Africa. They are semi-arboreal, which means they like to climb trees and hide in bushes. Many also inhabit brush piles in and around tropical rainforests in Africa. Their diet in the wild includes various African rodents including gerbils and African spiny mice. They tend to be most active at night. These habitat facts should be incorporated into your tank setup when you attain one of these excellent pets.

If the tank is set up improperly, ball pythons often refuse to feed. I recommend getting a tank that the snake can fully stretch out in. Inactive snakes will not eat consistently, so room to move about is essential. You will generally need at least a 30-gallon tank for an adult. Make sure the terrarium is escape proof. Cage temperature is also important in keeping the snake active and eating well. We recommend daytime temperatures of 80 to 88 degrees Fahrenheit with a basking spot of 90 degrees, and nighttime temperatures around 70-75 degrees. If a heat lamp is used, make sure it is setup outside the terrarium so the snake cannot climb on it and get burned. Humidity needs to be between 50-60%. Utilize a thermometer and humidity gage to check these values.

Ball pythons also benefit from a secure place to hide. An old cereal box is suitable or commercial hiding places may be purchased. Cage branching is a nice cage ornament as well as good simulation of the animal’s natural habitat. They will spend much of their time coiled around the branch. A water bowl of sufficient size for the entire snake to soak should be placed in the cage. It should be placed at the opposite end of the cage as the heat source, unless greater humidity is needed in the cage for complete proper shedding. Indoor/outdoor carpet is an ideal cage floor. It is aesthetically pleasing and easily cleaned once a week or whenever



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soiled. Two full size carpets are suggested in order to allow proper disinfecting and drying. Diluted bleach and dish soap disinfectants should be rinsed thoroughly.

Ball python babies will eat mice 1-2 times per week. Adults will eat every 7-10 days. Feeding ball pythons can be tricky, as they do not often care (particularly wild caught specimens) for the traditional white mouse found at pet stores. This is because rodents smell differently to them. As mentioned earlier, gerbils and African spiny mice are natural prey items. If your cage is properly set up and your snake refuses to eat, try one of these specimens.

There are other reasons why snakes do not eat, which need to be dealt with by a knowledgeable reptile/exotic veterinarian. The snakes may have problems with mites, ticks, intestinal parasites, or shedding difficulties. Other tricks to be tried on snakes that will not eat may be employed. Try taking away the snake's water for a period of 2-4 days and then offer gerbils that have been dipped in water. Force-feeding is the last resort and is usually not done particularly with ball pythons. These snakes may go for periods of one year without eating. Actions should be taken early in skinny snakes and never wait over two months before seeking help for your pet.

A note on feeding live prey: many ball pythons will eat only live prey. If it is necessary to feed live prey, it is essential to either stun the prey before offering it to your snake or observe the prey the entire time the prey is in the cage. When snakes are out of their natural environment, they will not be as skilled at killing their prey. Live rodents often become the predator in this case. Rodent bite wounds are common in ball pythons, and severe injuries from rodents are often seen. We suggest frozen prey that is thoroughly thawed before feeding. To try to convert to eating frozen thawed rodents, try rubbing a gerbil on the thawed rodent. Use tongs when feeding and twitch the rodent around to simulate rodent movement.

Common Medical Issues:

These include intestinal parasites, pneumonia, snake mites (tiny red-brown moving dots), incomplete shedding, and Inclusion Body Disease (IBD). IBD is a virus found in boas and pythons. It is fatal to pythons, but not to boas. Boas can carry and transmit the disease without being ill, which is why boas and pythons should never be kept together.