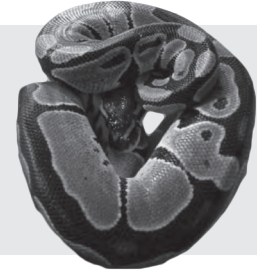


Ball Pythons



What is a Ball Python?

Ball Pythons (*Python regius*) are reptiles. All reptiles are poikilothermic (cold-blooded), which means they cannot produce their own body heat and must rely on environmental temperatures to regulate body heat. The Ball Python is native to Central and West-Central African tropical forests. Though related to giant snakes such as the Burmese Python, these snakes reach a modest size of between 4 to 5 feet in length and can live for up to 15 to 20 years. While any reptile can and will bite in certain situations, these snakes are usually gentle and tolerant of human handling and care, making it a popular pet snake.

How should I take care of my Ball Python?

Keeping any pet is a huge responsibility. Ball Pythons require very specific husbandry (care, food, shelter). The key to keeping your Ball Python healthy is to provide an environment close to its natural environment, including temperature range, humidity level, light cycle and landscape. Proper nutrition is also essential. The resources in this handout should be used as a starting guide. Your Banfield team is your best resource if you have questions about your reptile. The majority of your Ball Python's health concerns can be avoided by having the proper enclosure, and diet, and ensuring the reptile's environment is clean.

Minimum enclosure size requirements*

Length: 1x adult snake's total length

Depth: 2/3x adult snake's total length

Height (terrestrial): 3/4x adult snake's total length

Height (arboreal): 1x adult snake's total length

*Sizes listed are the minimum. Enclosures should be as large as possible.

Snakes are escape artists. Along with an enclosure of adequate size, a secure lid is a must. Snakes are strong and the lid must have some form of locking mechanism. Snakes need visual barriers in the enclosure to feel secure, calm and well-adjusted. Hide boxes can be purchased or homemade. The hide should be large enough to accommodate your snake, but snakes like to feel structure all around so keep the box snug. Hide boxes should be made out of a non-porous substance that is easy to clean, such as plastic.

The water bowl should be large enough for the snake to slither into and submerge at least half its body for a good soak, but not so deep that the snake cannot get out of the bowl. The bowl should have a wide base for stability and be easy to clean. Multiple bowls for any given enclosure are useful since snakes will often defecate in the water. Dirty bowls should be removed and cleaned quickly to ensure the health of your pet.

The substrate (material lining the bottom of the enclosure) should be nontoxic, easy to clean or replace, and safe for your pet. Some of the more commonly used substrates include newspaper, paper towels, outdoor patio carpet (sold in pet stores as reptile carpet), aspen shavings, cypress mulch and coconut fiber mulch. **Cedar or pine shavings should be avoided at all times as the aromatic oils found in these shavings are irritating and even toxic to snakes in some cases.**

Lighting. Snakes need a day/night cycle to be healthy. A simple fluorescent light makes an ideal light for a Ball Python's enclosure. You can also use an incandescent light to provide both heat and light for your Ball Python. An automatic timer for your light makes regulating the day/night cycle easier.

For additional information, please contact your Banfield medical team.

Environmental guidelines for Ball Pythons

Required temperature: 80°F-85°F (27°C-29°C)

Humidity levels: 60%-65%

Natural habitat: Savannah, terrestrial

The enclosure should be designed with a range of temperatures or a “heat gradient.” Temperature in one end of the enclosure should be cool, with the other end of the enclosure toward the high end of the heat spectrum. This will allow the Ball Python to regulate its own body heat based on metabolic needs by moving to the warm or cool end of the enclosure. If your pet consistently spends all of its time huddled under its heat source, the enclosure is too cold and vice versa.

Cleaning and disinfecting the enclosure is imperative for the health of your pet.

- Disposable substrate, such as newspaper or paper towels, should be changed as soon as it is soiled to prevent bacterial growth and odor.
- Carpet should be changed weekly and cleaned by soaking in a weak bleach/water solution. The carpet should then be thoroughly rinsed with water.
- Particulate substrates such as aspen shavings or cypress mulch can often be scooped to remove the fecal material and should be changed out entirely every two or three weeks.
- The enclosure, hide box, water bowls and other accessories should be cleaned with a mild bleach solution every two to three weeks as well. Thoroughly rinse items with water to remove all bleach residue.

Do not clean the enclosure, or any of the Ball Python’s accessories, in an area you prepare food in or bathe in.



What do I feed my Ball Python?

Snakes are obligate carnivores, which means they must eat other animals (meat) to survive. Prey items are available at specialty pet stores or through many internet-based companies. Most prey items are available live, pre-killed or frozen. Frozen prey must be thawed in a cup of warm water before being fed. Never thaw prey in the microwave. Never feed wild prey, as they can harbor toxins, parasites or infections that may harm you or your snake.

Adult Ball Pythons should be fed two large adult mice or one large adult rat once weekly. Juvenile snakes should be fed a suitably sized mouse every four to five days. The food item should leave a noticeable lump in the snake’s belly after it has been consumed. If it does not, then a larger prey item should be considered. Whole prey items such as mice and rats are nutritionally complete, and additional nutritional supplements should not be required unless directed by your Banfield veterinarian for specific medical/nutritional needs.

What about medical care for my Ball Python?

Your Banfield veterinarian can help you ensure the health of your pet. Like other family pets, your snake should visit your Banfield hospital at purchase, and then twice a year for a thorough examination and a microscopic evaluation of the snake’s stool.

For additional information, please contact your Banfield medical team.

What health concerns should I look for?

- Healthy skin is a sign of a healthy snake. All snakes “shed” their skin. This process begins with a gradual clouding of the eyes often called “blueing.” Snakes that are blue-up before a shed are often defensive and should not be handled or fed until the shed is complete. Within a period of one to seven days, the snake will shed its skin. Shedding usually takes place in one to two large pieces of skin. Seek help from your Banfield veterinarian if your pet sheds in rough irregular patches, or if the eye scales do not shed. A poor shed often indicates an underlying health problem. Any unusual skin blistering, wrinkling, color or scale changes should be brought to the attention of your Banfield veterinarian.
- Healthy snakes do not make noise when they breathe. If you can hear your snake breathing seek immediate care. “Yawning” after a meal is a normal means of realigning the bones and muscles of the jaw and skull and is not a cause for concern.
- Anorexia or loss of appetite is a very common problem for Ball Pythons. Often a snake will go for weeks and even months without eating. Very often the cause is an underlying husbandry issue, but may also be caused by infection, parasites or metabolic problems. If your snake has not eaten for over a month, a prompt examination at your Banfield hospital is recommended. Reptiles are very good at hiding signs of illness. In the wild, an animal that shows signs of weakness is often targeted by other animals. Even minor changes in feeding, behavior, energy level and stools may be symptoms of a greater medical concern. Contact your Banfield veterinarian right away if your snake changes routine. By the time a reptile appears sick, the disease process is often very advanced and may make treatment difficult, more expensive and reduce the chance of survival.

Can a Ball Python be harmful to my family?

All reptiles are potential carriers of zoonotic diseases (disease capable of being spread from animals to people) such as *Salmonella*. Pregnant women, young children and those with compromised immune systems (cancer, AIDS, chronic diseases) should avoid contact with your Ball Python. Some things you can do to ensure you keep your Ball Python and family healthy are:

- Buy only captive-bred reptiles.
- Immediately wash your hands with soap after handling your snake, its enclosure or accessories.
- Wear gloves and a mask when cleaning a snake’s enclosure.
- Do not kiss a snake or let it “kiss” you.
- Do not clean the enclosure, or any of the snake’s accessories, in an area where you prepare food.
- Do not let your snake bathe in the family bathtub or sink. Snakes prefer their own water space.
- If bitten or scratched by a snake’s tooth, thoroughly clean the affected area with soap and warm water and immediately consult your physician.
- Have your Ball Python examined by your Banfield veterinarian twice a year.

If you have any questions or concerns about the health of your pet, please contact your Banfield veterinarian.