

BALL PYTHON CARE GUIDE

Python regius — Royal Python

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Ball pythons can flourish as long-lived pets — up to 30–40 years in the right hands. Temperature, humidity, and feeding are the pillars of their care. Get those right and you'll have a healthy, personable snake for decades. Get them wrong and you'll be here a lot.



VITAL STATISTICS

Stat	Detail
Adult body length	36–48 inches (90–120 cm)
Age of sexual maturity	3–5 years
Maximum lifespan	30–40 years
Average captive lifespan	20–30 years
Native habitat	Western and west-central Africa — mixed grassland and savannah
Activity pattern	Nocturnal — most active in the evening



WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR BALL PYTHON

- Snakes do not respond to their owners the way dogs and cats do — they generally prefer to be left alone. This is not a personal rejection.
- Ball pythons are exceptionally shy — they earned their name by coiling into a tight ball when frightened. Coiling up is defensive behavior, not affection.
- They may appear to be a good beginner snake due to their small size and docility — but new owners must be prepared to manage **feeding problems, parasites, and secondary health issues**
- Acquire only young, captive-bred specimens that are proven eaters — wild-caught animals are more stressed, more parasite-laden, and far less willing to eat. Free-ranging ball pythons are considered a threatened species and permits are required for export.
- A frightened snake may lash with its tail, hiss, or in rare cases bite — handle during evening hours when they are naturally active

Sexing:

- Males typically have thicker tails and more curved anal spurs — but sexing is difficult and may be confirmed by a reptile veterinarian using a probe



HOUSING

Life Stage	Minimum Enclosure Size
Hatchling	10 gallon tank (50 × 25 cm)
Young adult	20 gallon tank (60 × 31 cm)
Large adult	30 gallon tank (90 × 31 cm) — minimum tank length = 2/3 of snake's body length

- Escape-proof enclosure only — the best option is a purpose-built snake enclosure with a fixed screen or hinged glass top
- Provide dark, secure hide boxes at **both the warm and cool ends** — the snake should never have to choose between warmth and security. These should be fairly snug, at most 50% bigger than the snake, in order for the snake to feel secure.
- Include a climbing branch with greenery for basking and enrichment
- Fresh water in a bowl large enough for the snake to soak — keep it clean
- Ball pythons are nocturnal — UVB lighting is not required
- **Never house snakes together** — they are not social animals and cohabitation causes significant stress

Safe substrate options:

- Newspaper, paper towels, indoor-outdoor carpet, or Astroturf — easy to clean and replace
- Avoid cedar, corncob, wood chips or shavings, gravel, dirt, and rocks



TEMPERATURE, LIGHTING & HUMIDITY

- Proper temperature regulation is more important than the physical enclosure for maintaining a healthy snake — room temperature is not adequate for digestion or immune function

Zone	Temperature
Ambient daytime (warm side)	80–85°F (27–29°C)
Basking area	90–92°F (32–33°C)
Cool end minimum	75°F (24°C) — never drop below this
Humidity	60–70% — essential for successful shedding

- Provide heat via reptile heating pads or incandescent bulbs in reflector hoods — placed to avoid direct contact with the snake
- **Never use hot rocks** — they cause thermal burns
- For humidity: provide a shedding box (a Tupperware container with two corners cut out for entry/exit) filled with damp sphagnum moss or dampened paper towels
- Young snakes shed approximately every 4–6 weeks; adults shed several times a year
- Full spectrum lighting with UVB is recommended to help stimulate normal behavior and allow them to regulate their daily activities. 2.5 – 5% bulbs from Arcadia or Zoo Med are recommended.



FEEDING

- Feed at night — ball pythons are nocturnal hunters and will be most receptive after dark
- Offer **only stunned or pre-killed** (frozen/thawed) prey — live prey can and will injure your snake
- Prey size should match the girth of the snake at mid-body — nothing larger

Age / Size	Feeding Frequency	Prey Item
Young (first 2–3 years)	Every 7–10 days	Fuzzies → hoppers → adult mice
Adult (3+ years)	Every 2 weeks	Adult mice or small rats as snake grows

- Defecation frequency depends on food consumption and age — should occur at least 1–2 times per month. Infrequent defecation warrants veterinary attention.



COMMON MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Condition	Notes
Intestinal parasites	Common in wild-caught animals — fecal testing at every vet visit
External parasites (mites and ticks)	Check skin and scales regularly; treat enclosure as well as snake
Respiratory disease	Often linked to incorrect temperatures or humidity
Mouth rot (stomatitis)	Requires veterinary treatment — do not delay
Dysecdysis (retained shed)	Retained skin or eye spectacles — usually a humidity problem
Obstipation / constipation	Linked to dehydration, low temps, or inappropriate prey
Bite wounds from prey	Always feed pre-killed or frozen/thawed prey to prevent injury
Dystocia / retained eggs	Reproductive emergency — requires immediate veterinary attention
Rectal, colon, or uterine prolapse	Veterinary emergency
Trauma / thermal burns	From hot rocks or direct contact with heating elements



GETTING STARTED RIGHT

- Buy from a reputable breeder — a young, captive-bred animal is less stressed and far more willing to eat than a wild-caught snake
- Take your new ball python to a reptile veterinarian for a general health exam and parasite testing **before settling in**

- Leave a newly purchased snake alone in its enclosure for **1–2 weeks** to acclimate before attempting regular handling
- Use a pillowcase or locking Tupperware container for transport — secure, dark, and stress-reducing
- Interact during evening hours when the snake is naturally active — daytime handling is tolerated but not preferred

Most reptiles, including ball pythons, carry Salmonella bacteria without appearing ill. Always wash hands thoroughly after handling your snake or anything in its enclosure. Ball pythons are not recommended for households with very young children or immunocompromised individuals.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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