



# Ball Python Care

A comprehensive guide on caring for your ball python

## Description

Ball pythons can grow up to 5 feet in length, but on average reach a length of 3-4 feet. Females are larger than males. Ball pythons can live to 30 years or more with proper care. They are native to tropical and warm areas in Africa. Ball pythons are generally non-defensive, calm, and shy snakes. Their common name "ball python" comes from their tendency to curl into a ball.



## Enclosure

An adult male ball python will require at minimum a 20 gallon long tank or equivalent sized tub. An adult female ball python will do best in a 40 gallon breeder tank (or equivalent sized tub) as they require more space due to their larger size. Hatchlings and younger snakes should be housed in smaller tubs or tanks. Compared to other snake species, ball pythons feel more comfortable and secure in smaller tanks - bigger isn't always better. If you do seek out a larger enclosure be sure to have plenty of cover for your snake to hide in. Refusing food may be a sign that they are not comfortable in their larger enclosure.

There are a variety of suitable substrates that can be utilized to maintain the high humidity that ball pythons require: cypress mulch, Reptichip coconut substrate, Eco Earth coconut fiber, and even newspaper and paper towels if you are using a rack system or similar. Your bedding should not be sopping wet, but should not be completely dry either, it is good to find a balance of slightly moist to maintain proper humidity. Avoid overly dry beddings such as any wood shavings (even in reptile-safe woods) and Carefresh. If you do use any loose substrate, be sure not to feed on it. Instead, feed your snake in a separate container.

It is important to provide décor that creates a hiding spot for the snake. A wide selection of materials can be utilized as a snake hide: shoebox, (non-transparent) plastic storage container, and premade hides found in any pet store are some excellent options. Ball pythons really like

security. They need a hide that provides privacy so select something that does not leave large openings. We recommend providing two hides on opposite ends of the enclosure for refuge in the heated portion and away from it.

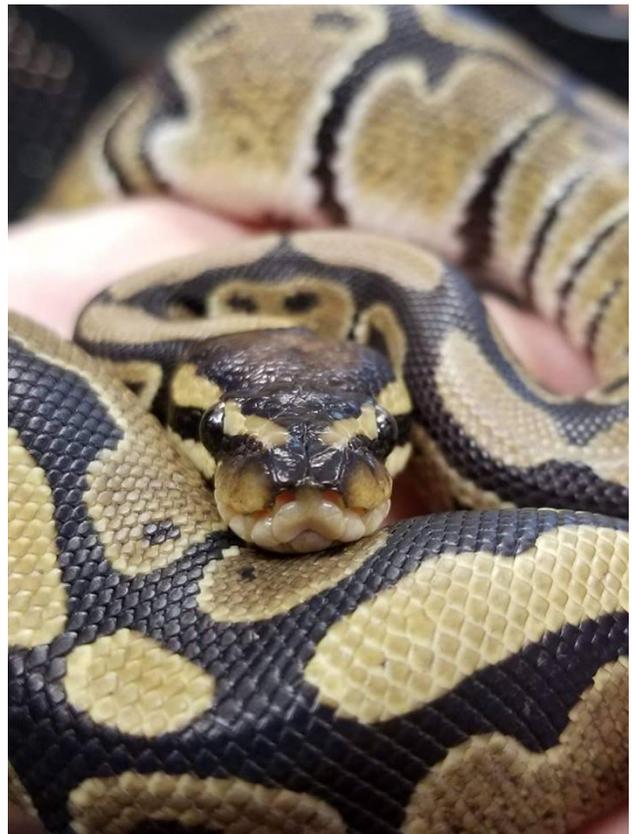
## Heating and Light

Creating a thermal gradient is crucial when housing a ball python. The goal when heating the enclosure is to create a temperature gradient with a cool side in the mid to high 70°s F and a warm/basking side between 89-95° F with a goal temperature of 92/93° F. To achieve these temperatures a ceramic heat emitter or under-tank heat mat is recommended. Heat tape can be placed in the back of rack systems. Basking lights are an option, but should be used with caution as they may overheat the enclosure. If you are interested in using a heat mat, you must also use a temperature regulator (thermostat). Pet stores may try to sell you a heat mat only – this can heat the glass in the tank too hot and even crack it! Thus, a temperature regulator is used to set the temperature of the heat mat. It has a probe that you place over the warm spot (under the warm hide) and will turn off the heat mat when the temperature reaches that maximum set level. UV bulbs can be used on display tanks but are not necessary.

We do **not** recommend heat rocks to fulfill ball python heating requirements. Heat rocks often have "hot spots" and can overheat quickly, possibly causing severe thermal burns. If a reptile is housed in an enclosure that is cold everywhere except one heat rock, it will spend most of its time curled around it, and in direct contact with an unstable heat source. This can cause severe burns and damage to the snake.

## Humidity

Ideal ball python humidity is 50-60%. The best way to alter the humidity in your enclosure is to change the substrate or keep more moisture in your substrate. Also, a water bowl should be provided to your snake at all times and should be large enough to allow for soaking, while not overflowing water into the enclosure. The best way to help your ball python shed is to soak it for 30-60 minutes in shallow (usually 1-2 inches depending on size of snake), warm water in a secure container. Also, a humidity box can be put in, and left in the enclosure for the snake to use whenever it needs to. Humidity boxes can be easily and cheaply constructed out of plastic container large enough to house a loosely coiled snake. An access hole must be cut in the side,



but otherwise the box should remain closed. A layer of moist moss such as sphagnum or peat should be put inside the humidity box and kept moist at all times. Moist paper towels work as well and are easier to replace but tend to dry out more quickly. With baby snakes, a deli cup can be used to make a humidity box.

## **Co-Habitation**

Only house one snake per enclosure. In the wild they are mainly solitary and only seek each other out to mate. Additionally, one individual may become dominant over the other(s) and create a stressful environment. Stressed snakes are likely to eat less and deteriorate in health.

## **Feeding**

Ball python hatchlings do best on a diet of rat pups, generally one or two per week. As the snake grows, so should its prey. A general rule of thumb is to feed a ball python a food item that is up to as large as, but no larger, than the biggest part of its body. Feed frozen rats that have been thawed completely in warm water and dried with a paper towel. If you have difficulty getting your snake to eat frozen/thawed rats, you can aid in the transition by feeding freshly killed rats, then move to frozen/thawed. It is helpful to start juvenile ball pythons on rats instead of mice because eventually they will need larger meals than mice can provide and if they are already used to eating rats it may save potential difficulty transitioning from mice to rats.

If you are keeping your snake on a loose substrate (coconut fiber, mulch, etc.) do not feed your snake in its enclosure. Loose substrate can stick to prey items and be ingested, causing potential health problems.

Ball pythons are notoriously picky eaters. Food refusal is caused by a number of things such as incorrect environmental conditions, a shed phase, being gravid (pregnant), or illness. Or, in the case of a ball python, nothing at all. Generally, if your adult snake is of good body condition and health, it is only a cause of concern if your ball python has gone 3 months or more without food. This is not the case if you have a young, sick, or thin snake. The most important thing is to pay attention to body condition as that will be your best indication of when your snake has gone dangerously long without food. Ball pythons do not brumate (hibernate) over the winter, but during the winter season they may not eat even if they have the correct environmental conditions and if they are not sick, shedding, or gravid. If you are concerned about your snake's health related to not eating for a prolonged period of time, the best option is to see an experienced exotic vet. (See [www.norcalherp.com](http://www.norcalherp.com) for local vet recommendations.)

## **Water**

Make sure to provide a bowl with enough fresh water to allow soaking, but not so much as to cause overflowing into the enclosure when the snake enters. Change this water regularly, especially since snakes often use water to defecate.

## **Maintenance**

Provide a constant source of fresh water, cleaning the bowl weekly. Spot clean the enclosure every day for unwanted material and feces. Cleaning solutions such as Chlorhexidine, F10 SC Veterinary Disinfectant, or vinegar and water can be used. Make sure to replace old bedding with fresh bedding when cleaning.

## **Handling**

Snakes are escape artists! When handling your snake make sure to watch carefully and always have at least one hand on the animal. If your snake is skittish or defensive when being handled, increasing the frequency of handling will help improve your snake's comfort when out of its enclosure.

