



## **Ball Pythons**

*Python regius*

**Amanda Zellar, DVM**

Ball pythons are named for their characteristic defense of curling into a ball when frightened. Ball pythons typically have a gentle nature, making them popular pets. They originate from west and central Africa. Some ball pythons seen in the pet trade are wild-caught or hatchlings of gravid (pregnant) wild-caught animals. Captive born and raised pythons usually have fewer parasites, are easier to handle, and make better pets. They can live for 20-50 years. Hatchlings from eggs are 10-17 inches, adults are 3-5 feet long, occasionally reaching 6 feet, with females being larger than males.

**Health care:** Snakes can be very good at hiding illness. We recommend physical exams, CBC, chemistries, and fecal float yearly and for new snakes. Weighing your pet at home can be a good way to catch illnesses early. Please bring them in to see us if their weight changes by 10%, or more. Common problems are anorexia(not eating), cancer, intestinal obstruction, constipation, stomatitis (mouth rot), incorrect husbandry, upper respiratory problems, pneumonia, and intestinal parasites. Remember with any disease processes, the sooner we see the animal, the more successful we are at treating them!

**Husbandry:** Avoid handling new snakes until they have eaten at least twice. Keep only one snake per enclosure. 10 gallon enclosures are suitable for young snakes, 20 gallon for adults, and 30 gallon for large adults. Newspaper or indoor-outdoor carpeting should be used as a substrate. Do not use cedar, walnut or pine bedding as the strong smell and oils in these woods can be irritating. The dust of most wood shavings can cause problems in snakes and often dehydrate reptiles. Shavings can also be swallowed while the snake is eating and cause GI obstructions. Ball pythons are semi-arboreal, and like to have things to climb on. Make sure they are secure and do not collapse on the animal. A dark tight hiding place should be provided for security. Disposable boxes that can be thrown away and replaced, when the snake defecates and urinates (poops and pees) make cleaning up easy. Otherwise the hide should be washable. The box should allow a tight fit for the snake, but also have a way to get the snake out if needed. Snakes should always have fresh water available in a dish that cannot be tipped over. Clean and disinfect water bowls weekly. The temperature should range from 90-95°F in the warm end of the cage to 80°F in the cool end. Use a digital thermometer or temperature gun to monitor. A heat lamp should be used and set off to one side to give the

**More on the back!**

enclosure a temperature gradient. Do not use hot rocks as they can easily cause thermal burns. Be sure to keep lights off at night. Ceramic heating elements can be used to produce heat without light. Normal humidity levels of 50-70% are recommended but can be hard to maintain with good airflow, in many regions, making daily soaking necessary. Soak in warm water every day for 15 minutes. Tupperware containers with air holes drilled in them tend to work well. Keep water shallow enough that the snake will not drown. During sheds, a humidity box (tupperware with a smooth hole for the snake to enter) that is partially filled with damp sphagnum moss is very helpful. Remove feces and urates from the enclosure daily, and clean out the entire enclosure monthly, rinsing thoroughly with water, and allowing the enclosure to dry before putting the snake back in.

**Diet:** Avoid handling new ball pythons until they have eaten at least twice. Do not handle snakes within 24 hours of feeding. Feed juvenile snakes every 5-7 days and adults every 1-2 weeks. It is better to feed smaller items but in greater numbers, than something too big. Appropriate meal items include pre-killed rodents. Live rodents can bite and severely wound snakes. Juveniles do best with fuzzies or immature mice. Adults do best with 3-6 mice. Females will usually stop eating if they are gravid. Ball pythons often become less active and less interested in food from October to April. Many snakes have a decreased appetite before shedding. Consult a veterinarian if your snake skips more than 2 months. Some snakes will not eat for several hours after handling. Here are some suggestions to try at home if your snake is not eating:

1. Fix any husbandry problems, particularly related to temperature.
2. Try feeding at night. These snakes are nocturnal.
3. Try feeding a gerbil or a mouse scented with bedding from a gerbil's cage. Gerbils are more closely related to the rodents ball pythons eat in the wild and sometimes more appealing to them.
4. Offer freshly killed prey.
5. Place the python and killed rodent into a pillowcase, tied shut, overnight. Be sure to remove all water containers from the cage.
6. Remove the water bowl for 2 days and stop soaks. Then place a rodent soaked in warm water in front of the entrance to the hide box.
7. Offer a live pinkie, mouse or rat, but do not leave the snake unsupervised with a live rodent!
8. If you are still having problems, schedule an exam with your veterinarian.

**Shedding:** Occurs as the snake increases in size, in adults usually every 6 months. Usually the eyes will cloud over several days before they shed, and at this time an otherwise gentle snake can become aggressive due to decreased vision and likely discomfort. Do not feed them at this time. The shed should come off in one or two pieces. Problems occur in animals with low humidity. A common problem with this is retained eyecaps, or spectacles. We do not recommend you try to remove them, as the corneas of the eyes are easily damaged this way. Please schedule an appointment with your veterinarian if this problem occurs. Always check the shed to make sure the eye caps and the end of the tail are with it.

**Sexing:** Done by a veterinarian or an experienced herpetologist using a probe, which if done improperly provides an incorrect sexing and can hurt the animal.

