

Ball Python Care Guide

Lifespan: 20-40 years

Length: 3-6 feet

Habitat

Ball pythons tend to be very docile creatures, and are generally not aggressive at all. There are many different opinions on what type of enclosure they require, heating, lighting, etc. They are probably one of the most controversial reptiles as far as husbandry goes. This care guide is written as a recommendation based on years worth of personal experience, and much research. Some people keep them in many different habitats. The one that we recommend for the general snake keeper (not a breeder), is a tank. Ball pythons can become stressed out from many different factors, one of which is tank size. You don't want it to be too large, or too small. If you have a hatchling, you should start in at least a 10-20 gallon, and for full grown ones they should be in at least a 40-55 gallon tank.

Modifying the Tank and Cohabbing

Now there are a couple modifications that a tank needs in order to be an appropriate environment for the ball python. They like to be hidden, need a certain humidity level, and heat level. To provide the sense of security that they need, we recommend taking some black foam board and covering 3 of the 4 sides with it. This not only helps them from not being stressed out by seeing activity around them, but helps with insulation. In order to keep heat and humidity in, you should cover 75% of the screen top with tinfoil. Make sure you either have a tank with a locking lid, or put some weights, or clips on the screen. Snakes are strong, and will push out of a screen lid if given the opportunity. The tank should also be placed in a part of the house that is not too busy, as they prefer isolation. With this being said, ball pythons should never be cohabbed with each other or anything else. Some people may do it, but it is not recommended as it can stress them out, and they can injure or even eat one another.

Heating and Humidity Requirements

Ball pythons need to have fairly high heat and humidity. The humidity needs to be kept at 70%. Do not go lower than 60%, as that can cause respiratory infections, and problems with shedding. Please do not mist them down to regulate humidity. Many people and websites recommend that, but it is very stressful for the snake and causes a

temporary spike in humidity. Instead, mix in some water with the bedding if the humidity is too low. It is necessary to buy a digital hygrometer for the tank to keep an eye on the humidity.

As far as heat goes, they need a temperature gradient, of hot to cool. On the hot side, it needs to be between 88-92 degrees fahrenheit. On the cooler side, it should be 76-80 degrees. The proper temperatures and gradient can be difficult to maintain. The amount of heating equipment required can depend on the season, and how warm or cold the house itself is. As a general rule though, you should start out with a heat mat. This needs to be on a thermostat to regulate its temperature, because it can burn the snake if it gets too hot. The heat mat needs to be placed at one end of the tank, and have a hide on top of it. Belly heat is a must for snakes, as it aides in digestion. Heat also should come from above the snakes as well. This simulates what they would experience in nature. Lights however can hurt the snakes eyes and stress them out, so we only recommend heat sources that do not put off light. We recommend buying a CHE (ceramic heat emitter). This is a bulb that produces heat without any light. It can get extremely hot though, so make sure you have a dimmer switch on the dome it is in. The CHE should not be placed over the heat mat, as that can create an ovenlike spot (snakes do not know to move if they are getting burned. They only feel the heat, and will stay on it even if they are getting hurt). The CHE should be placed a little bit to the side of the heat mat and hot side, but not on the complete opposite side of the tank as they need to have a cool side. This can take a little bit of time to get the setup just right to provide the proper heat, but as long as you have a gradient and the correct temps then you can decide what placement works best for you. It is necessary to buy a DIGITAL thermometer (preferably 2, one on the warm side, one on the cool), to correctly regulate the habitats temperatures. We do not recommend thermometers that are dials, or have sticky sides to them. Many snakes have been injured on the adhesive attached to them, and the dials are very inaccurate.

Contents of the Tank

The inside of the tank must contain at least 2 hides, one placed on the hot end, and the other placed on the cool end. The tank should have ample places for the snake to hide (these can be artificial plants, hides, etc), and should have a 'cluttered' type feel to it. The tank should also include some rough items (not sharp), whether that be the hides, or some other decorations. That way the snake has something to rub up against when it sheds.

Substrate

Many people use different substrates for ball pythons. We personally recommend a mix of cypress mulch with repti bark, or other similar bedding. This mix is fantastic for keeping humidity in, but you can also provide sphagnum moss throughout the tank to help regulate the humidity, but please change it regularly, as it can become moldy. We don't like using wood chips, as they can carry mites on them, and many different types of wood beddings also produce oils/scents that are harmful for the snakes, so please be careful when trying out new wood beddings without doing research on them first. We also don't like using eco earth. Although it is great to hold humidity in, we find it complicates feedings (snakes getting mouthfuls of bedding), as well as the fact that it can get stuck in their heat pits. Paper towels and newspaper have been known to be okay substitutes, but can get moldy very fast if not regularly changed. Please completely change out the bedding every 4-6 weeks, and spot clean every week as needed. Please make sure that the bedding on top is not dry and crumbly, but also is not soaking. Too high humidity can cause scale rot and mold, and too low humidity can cause shedding and respiratory issues.

Diet and Feeding

Hatchling ball pythons should eat every 5-7 days, and adults every 7-10. For the best results, we recommend feeding in the evening, as ball pythons are nocturnal. Snakes eat a variety of animals, and should get as much as a variety as possible. They most commonly eat mice and rats. We prefer rats, as we find they tend to be a little bit more nutritious. These feeders come in all different sizes. The size that the snake eats is dependent on its girth. The largest part around of the snake, is how large its prey can be. Do not feed it animals too large for it, this can cause severe damage and even death. You can find feeders frozen at most pet stores, or can buy live. We recommend always starting on frozen feeders. When you are ready to feed your snake, you need to thaw out the feeder (in warm water, or setting it in the fridge a day in advance). Make sure it is completely thawed out, as it can hurt the snake if any part of it is still frozen. When it's time to feed it, use tongs to make them aware of it and, dangle it a little bit above them. They will show interest in it if they lift their head, and start smelling the air with their tongues. When they are ready, they will strike, grab it, and curl around it. Do not disturb them once they have the feeder. Check on the snake every so often to make sure it actually ate the food. Some snakes will not eat frozen thawed, and in that case either freshly killed, or feeding live is necessary. However feeding live can be very dangerous for the snake. Mice and rats do bite, and will cause damage if they do. NEVER leave your snake unattended with a live prey item. If you must feed live, do so with tongs available for intervention if needed.

Feeding/Tank Aggression

There are many people who believe that it is necessary to move a ball python to feed it, as they believe feeding it inside the tank makes it aggressive. This is a myth and we do not support moving to feed. This can be very stressful for the snake, and is completely unnecessary. If you only reach into the tank to feed them, then they might associate you only with food, and react accordingly, but if you handle them a few times a week, and provide the correct husbandry, they should not react poorly to you reaching in. A stressed snake is an unhappy snake, and can cause aggression issues.

Shedding and Regurgitation

You should not handle your snake for 48 hours after it has eaten. If you do so, you can cause it to regurgitate its food or have other digestion issues. Ball pythons shed every so often. They shed more when they are young, and less often as adults. When they are getting ready to shed, they will become very dull, and their eyes will have an almost blueish tint about them. This is known as going into blue, and you should not handle them during this time. They can be very uncomfortable, and slightly aggressive while preparing to shed. They also may not want to eat at this time, which is perfectly normal. Once they shed (within the next few days), remove the shed from the tank, and resume normal interactions with them. They should shed in one piece. If the shed is sticking to them, and coming off in bits and pieces, bump the humidity up to aid in the process. Do NOT try to pull the shed off yourself, as you can hurt the snake by doing so. If it is struggling to shed, you may run your hands gently down it to remove anything that's loose, but never pull it off. NEVER soak your ball python. Many people recommend it, but it is very stressful and dangerous for the snake! If they are having severe issues with shedding, please make them a humid hide, or some sort of makeshift sauna. Otherwise, keep the humidity up and let them be. You can also place them in a damp pillowcase and let them move around in that for about 10 minutes to help them dislodge any shed they may be retaining.

Respiratory Infections

If your snake is ever open mouthed breathing for extended periods of time, is blowing bubbles, or wheezing, then it most likely has a respiratory infection. These are commonly caused by incorrect living conditions (humidity, heat, stress etc). The husbandry issue needs to be corrected, as well as seeking veterinary attention.