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Ball Pythons as Pets Care Sheet

Housing

Ball pythons are not terribly active snakes, so a smaller enclosure is fine (10-20 gallon tank for younger snakes, 30 gallon tank for an adult). However, they are adept escape artists, so a securely fitted top is an absolutely necessary. Floor space is more important than height, so a low cage is better than a tall one.

- **Substrate:** Use about 2” of shredded aspen or cypress in the bottom of the cage—never use aromatic bark chips such as pine or cedar—the oils are toxic to pythons and will kill them. Astroturf could also be used, but when soiled, will need to be cleaned and disinfected in a solution of one quart of water with 2 tablespoons of bleach, rinsed well, and dried before replacing in the cage.
- **Furnishings:** Use only smooth glass or plastic items that can be thoroughly washed and disinfected. Rough-textured items provide hiding spots for unwanted parasites and should be avoided. Only two items are really necessary—a water dish and a hide box. We use Pyrex water dishes—straight sided glass dishes. Dog or cat watering dishes are also good. They should be large enough so the snake can coil up in them. The hide box can be anything that is dark inside and allows access for the snake. We use plastic dishes or planter liners with a hole cut in the top. The hide box should fit the snake without much extra space inside. They like tight places to help them feel secure. Even a couple of hide boxes could be used if the cage is large enough.
- **Temperature:** Ambient (air) temperature of 80 - 85 F during the day, with a basking spot of around 90 F at one end of the cage. Night time ambient temperatures can fall to around 75 F as long as the basking spot area of at least 80 F is maintained. An under the tank heating pad designed for reptiles works well for the basking spot. **Never** use hot rocks! Use multiple thermometers to monitor the temperatures in the cage (one at the bottom of the cage and one at the basking spot). Or, purchase an infra-red thermometer and “shoot” the temperature at each end of the cage on a daily basis at first, then periodically thereafter to double check. These thermometers can be purchased through LLL Reptile online and are about \$25.
- **Lighting:** Ball Pythons are nocturnal, so they have no special lighting requirements. However, because they are nocturnal, lighting should not be used at night (to preserve the light/dark cycle the snake needs) - instead use red, blue or black bulbs or cover the snake cage when the room light is turned on at night.
- **Water and Humidity:** Provide a dish large enough for the snake to soak in. Soaking is especially important during sheds. Humidity level should be monitored using a stick-on gauge inside the cage and maintained between 50-80% at all times. Use a plastic spray bottle filled with water to spray inside the cage if the humidity falls below 50
- **Feeding:** Ball pythons thrive on rats or mice exclusively. When taking home one of our snakes, start it out on live rats of the appropriate size. That is what it is used to. Once it becomes accustomed to new surroundings, you can convert over to mice or frozen rats if you prefer. Frozen prey must be thoroughly thawed and brought to room temperature. The prey size should be just larger in diameter than the diameter of the snake so a slight lump is observed after the

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prey has been swallowed. Never leave a live mouse in the cage unattended as it could injure and even kill your snake. We feed our snakes every week, but they will do just fine if fed every other week. Ball pythons sometimes fast for several weeks at a time. This is normal. As long as body weight and condition are maintained, this is not problematic. If your snake stops eating, carefully examine the husbandry, handling (see below), health, and environment of the snake to make sure stress isn't the culprit. There are tricks to entice a fasting snake back into eating mode, so if fasting persists, call or email us and we will try to help.

Handling

Ball pythons are usually very gentle and shy. When they are startled or feel threatened, they will coil into a tight ball and tuck their head inside—that is why they are called *ball* pythons! When picking up a ball python, look first to see what its demeanor is—is its neck in tight S-curves and looking right at you or making a move toward you? It is probably thinking you are about to feed it, so gently place a cloth over it until it backs down. Then pick it up at about the middle of its length and it should be just fine. When you open the cage if it backs into its hide box or tucks its head, then no cloth is necessary. Never attempt to pick it up by moving your hand straight toward its head when it is looking at you. Rather, go behind its head and approach it from the back, once again picking it up at about the middle of its length.

Shedding

Ball pythons shed their skin every so often—about every two months or so. The first sign that your snake is in shed will be the pinkish color on its belly. The skin will then appear dull—almost dusty. After several days, the python's eyes will turn milky blue and will remain that way for a few days. Then it will appear to be almost back to normal for a day or two. Shortly thereafter you will notice the shed skin in the cage. A good shed is when the skin comes off all in one piece and looks like a sock turned inside out when you pull it off your foot! A bad shed is when the skin comes off in pieces and some is left sticking to the snake. Be sure to examine the shed skin to find the headpiece and check to see if the eyepieces have come off. If they haven't, or if the snake has had a bad shed and has pieces still sticking to it, then soak it in tepid water for 30 minutes to an hour. Just place it in a plastic container with a lid—be sure there are air holes in the container so it can breathe. Then remove it and dry it off with a rough towel to rub the dead skin off. If it has not shed its eyepieces, make a note to observe what happens next time it sheds—it may shed both layers the next time.

While your snake is in shed, it is best not to handle it much at all as this will cause it to have a bad shed. There is a thin layer of water forming between the new and old skin that facilitates the shed. If pressure is applied to the skin at this time, the water layer is disrupted, causing the old skin to stick to the new skin. Also, do not offer food to the snake during the shed cycle—especially once its eyes turn blue. It is fairly blind at this time and offering food will cause stress.

Husbandry

Ball pythons can live for years in captivity if they are well cared for. The most important thing is cleanliness and maintaining proper temperature and humidity. When the snake defecates or produces urea (sort of whitish like that of birds), simply take a paper towel and gather up the feces, urea, and soiled bedding and throw it in the trash. Add more clean bedding. About once a month the cage and furnishing should be washed with hot, soapy water and disinfected with a Clorox solution, rinsed, and dried and fresh bedding placed in the bottom of the cage. Pythons are susceptible to ticks and mites, but these should not be a problem if good husbandry is practiced. We treat the aspen bedding with a product called Provent-a-Mite just to be sure. It can be ordered online from LLL Reptile. It is expensive, (about \$20/can) but one can should last a couple of years or more. Snakes leaving our facility are tick and mite free.