

Periodic Table Pythons – Basic Care Sheet for Ball Pythons

General Information

Ball pythons originate from Ghana, Africa, and the surrounding regions. The snakes get their name from their main defensive posture, which is curling up into a tight ball with their heads in the center. In captivity, they typically get three to four feet long (males tend to be smaller than females) and can live 20 to 40 years in captivity. They are sexually mature in two to five years, though three years is more average.

Choosing a Snake

Healthy ball pythons will have clear eyes, no stuck shed anywhere, a clean mouth, regularly flick their tongues, and generally be alert and curious. Some can be snappy, but most will shy away when disturbed. They should not be overly thin, as ball pythons tend to be a somewhat hefty snake—thicker than boas of the same size but not as massive as blood pythons.

Enclosure

Ball pythons can be kept in enclosures like glass terraria or plastic sweater boxes as long as their basic needs are met. Hatchlings can be housed in 10 gallon tanks, juveniles in 20 gallon, and adults in 30 to 40 gallon. If one is using plastic bins, a six-quart tub is big enough for hatchlings, 15 to 28 quart tubs for juveniles, and 40 quart or more tubs for adults. One of the most important things about the enclosure is that it needs to be as escape-proof as possible. Snakes are wonderful escape artists, and if there's a way for them to get out, they'll find it!

Environment

Ball python enclosures should have a warm side and a cool side so that the snake can choose what temperature it likes. Daytime temperatures should be 85F to 90F on the warm side and 75F to 80F on the cool side. The temperatures can be dropped about 5 degrees at night, but it is not necessary, especially since a room's temperature typically drops at night anyway.

Heat can be provided by pretty much anything but heat rocks. (Heat rocks should never be used for any reptile or amphibian!) Overhead lighting can be used to heat a cage, but be aware that lights tend to lower the humidity, which could become a problem. Under-tank heaters, heating pads, heat cable, or heat tape can be used with tanks or tubs, though they should be connected to a thermostat so the snake doesn't get burned. Ceramic heat emitters are comparable to light bulbs but they don't produce any visible light. Visible light is not necessary during the day but can be used if desired. (Fluorescent tube lights are great for illuminating a tank without adding additional heat.) The tank or tub should not be illuminated at night, as ball pythons are nocturnal, and they also do not require UV light.

A variety of substrates can be used, such as cypress or aspen wood chips (cedar and pine should never be used), reptile bark, astroturf, or paper towels. Small particulate bedding, such as sand or crushed walnut, is not appropriate for this species.

A water bowl and at least one hide should be provided. If housing snakes in glass tanks, it is better to have a hide on both the warm and cool sides so the snake can choose the temperature it likes. The water bowl should be cleaned every couple weeks unless soiled.

Ball pythons require moderate humidity levels. If the snake isn't shedding all in one piece, the humidity isn't high enough. Glass, towels, or the like can be put on the top of a screened cage to keep in humidity. The easier approach is to include a humid hide somewhere in the cage (in addition to the normal hide). Damp coco peat, moss, and even paper towels can be used in a humid hide.

Multiple ball pythons can be housed together, but the snakes will stress easier if not allowed a large enough enclosure and plenty of hiding places. Definitely do not put males and females together if eggs are not wanted! Be aware that males may not get along well together, and even females together can have issues. In addition, if one snake gets sick, tankmates are likely to get sick as well. It is best to simply house them all individually to avoid these problems.

Feeding

Adults can be fed once a week or once every two weeks; hatchlings should be fed at least once a week. All snakes should be fed rodents no larger than the widest part of the snake. Frozen/thawed rodents are cheaper and easier to store than live, but sometimes ball pythons are picky and won't take frozen/thawed. If feeding live, be sure the rodent doesn't hurt the snake in the process. (Rats are particularly notorious for injuring snakes.) Never, ever leave a live rodent with a snake for a long period of time, like a few hours or overnight. The rodent will begin to chew on the python, causing severe injury or death.

Ball pythons are notorious for going off feed. This usually happens during the winter months, but it can also occur seemingly at random. If this happens, don't panic! Snakes can go months without food. As long as the snake isn't losing a significant amount of weight in a short time, it should be okay. (For example, I had a snake go nine months without feeding, and he only lost 15% of his bodyweight in that time, which means he was doing just fine and there was no need to worry...though it was aggravating at times!) Underweight snakes are characterized by a pronounced spine, triangular cross-section, lack of muscle tone (e.g., can the snake still grab things?), weakness, and lethargy.

One of the great things about snakes is that they don't poop very often! They generally defecate once a month or so depending on age (younger snakes go more frequently).

Shedding

Snakes will shed every month or two, depending on their age (more often for younger snakes). When a python begins its shed cycle, its color becomes duller, the belly scales turn pink, and the

eyes start to look cloudy or opaque. After about a week or so, the snake will shed. If the humidity is at the right level, all the shed will come off in one piece. Too low humidity will result in a snake shedding in bits and pieces. If this happens, place the snake in a tub with a damp towel or paper towels for about 30 minutes. Then gently rub the snake to remove the remaining skin.

Warning Signs

It is always good to be aware of signs that a snake may have health problems:

- Stargazing (lifting the head off the ground and staring upward frequently or for long periods of time);
- Wheezing/popping noises;
- Open-mouthed breathing;
- Mucus or bubbles in or around the mouth;
- Pink/red belly scales when not in shed;
- Regurgitation of meals;
- Weakness;
- Having difficulty righting itself when turned on its back;
- Inability to shed properly, even with sufficient humidity;
- Excessive soaking in water bowl when not in shed.

Any of these symptoms, especially if they persist, require a visit to an experienced reptile vet. Be aware that normal dog and cat vets probably don't have much experience with reptiles. This is why it is good to know if there are any reptile vets in your area before purchasing a reptile. The Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians (ARAV) has a website for finding reptile vets in the United States, Canada, and some other countries (<http://arav.site-ym.com/search/custom.asp?id=3661>).

Other Care Information

Disinfectants are necessary for keeping the snake's tank and furniture clean. Many different kinds are available, from those used by veterinarians (chlorhexidine) to cheaper off-the shelf brands (ammonia, bleach). Anything cleaned with ammonia or bleach should be rinsed and allowed to completely dry before being reintroduced to the reptile's habitat. Never mix bleach and ammonia! Pick one and stick to it! I prefer ammonia as it will kill certain parasites that bleach won't, but it should only be used in a well-ventilated area.

If there are any questions about care not covered here, feel free to e-mail me at periodictablepythons@gmail.com!