REPTILE CARE GUIDE | UNITED STATES

Ball Python

Python regius | Practical owner guide | Habitat, feeding, hygiene, health and costs

A long-lived, usually shy snake that depends on a secure enclosure, a measured heat gradient, suitable humidity and thoughtful feeding. Set up and test the habitat before bringing the snake home.



Illustrative species photograph

15-page guide | For prospective and current keepers

1. Is a Ball Python Right for You?

At a glance

Adult length	Typical lifespan	Activity	Commitment
Often about 3-5 ft; individuals vary	Often 20-30 years with good care; some live longer	Mostly evening, night and dawn; secretive	Long-term daily husbandry, stable heating, prey storage and access to reptile veterinary care

Ball pythons (also called royal pythons) are native to parts of West and Central Africa. Their common name refers to their defensive behavior of curling into a compact ball. They are not domesticated; calm behavior depends on the individual, gentle handling, predictable routine and a safe environment.

What ownership involves

• A locked, escape-resistant enclosure with enough floor area for the snake to stretch out.

• Reliable thermostatically controlled heat, measured at more than one point.

• A whole-prey diet, usually frozen-thawed rodents, with a freezer and safe thawing routine.

• Routine cleaning, weight and feeding records, and a reptile veterinarian.

• A plan for a 20-year-plus commitment, travel cover, and emergency costs.

A ball python is usually best kept as a viewing and occasional gentle-handling animal. It does not need companionship or frequent handling to thrive.

2. Choosing a Healthy Snake

Before you bring one home

• Choose a captive-bred animal from a responsible source and ask for hatch date, sex if known, feeding history, prey type, shed records and any veterinary records.

• Ask whether the snake takes frozen-thawed prey reliably and when it last ate. Request a record rather than relying on “eats well.”

• Check current state and local rules. Some jurisdictions regulate exotic snakes, shipping, or particular morphs. Do not assume rules are the same everywhere.

• Prepare the enclosure and confirm temperatures and humidity for several days before pickup. Arrange an appointment with a reptile-experienced veterinarian.

Visual check

• Look for clear eyes outside the shed cycle, smooth scales, normal body condition, clean vent, steady tongue flicks, and quiet closed-mouth breathing.

• Avoid animals with wheezing, bubbles or mucus around nostrils, open-mouth breathing, wounds, retained shed, mites, swollen areas, unusual thinness, or a dirty vent.

• Do not attempt sexing by probing or popping. Ask a reptile veterinarian or qualified specialist.

Quarantine a new reptile away from other reptiles, with separate tools and handwashing. Keep quarantine records and ask the veterinarian how long to maintain separation.

3. Enclosure and Furnishings

Give the adult a permanent home

A secure enclosure around 4 ft long x 2 ft deep x 2 ft high (about 120 x 60 x 60 cm) is a practical adult target; larger is useful when the snake can use the space and the heating gradient stays correct. A hatchling can start in a suitably furnished enclosure that does not feel exposed, but plan for adult housing early. A secure front-opening PVC, sealed wood, or other reptile-safe enclosure often holds heat and humidity more predictably than a screen-topped glass tank.

Furnish it for security and choice

• Two snug hides: one over the warm zone and one over the cool zone. The snake should fit with its body touching the sides.

• A heavy, tip-resistant water bowl large enough for the snake to choose to soak in; place so it cannot spill over heat equipment.

• Clutter, cork, sturdy branches and artificial or verified non-toxic plants. Secure heavy decor so it cannot crush or trap the snake.

• A humid hide with damp sphagnum or paper towel can be offered, cleaned and refreshed to prevent mold. It supplements correct whole-enclosure humidity.

No cohabitation: keep one ball python per enclosure. Do not put it with another snake, lizard, mammal or bird.

4. Heat, Humidity and Lighting

Measure the environment

Zone / feature	Practical target to verify
Warm hide / warm side	About 88-92°F (31-33°C)
Cool side	About 76-80°F (24-27°C)
Humidity	Usually about 60-80%; avoid persistently wet substrate and stagnant air
Light cycle	A consistent day-night rhythm, commonly about 10-12 hours of visible light

Published husbandry recommendations vary, especially for humidity. Use a digital probe thermometer at the warm and cool ends and a separate hygrometer near the snake's level; measure surface temperature with an infrared thermometer. A reptile veterinarian can help adjust targets to your exact setup and climate.

Safe heat and light

• Run every heat source through a correctly rated thermostat. A thermostat does not replace thermometers. Recheck after room temperature changes.

• Overhead radiant heat is a common choice. Guard any hot lamp or element inside the enclosure. Never use an unregulated heat source or hot rock.

• Low-output UVB can be offered with correct distance, shade and a day/night cycle; it is beneficial enrichment though whole-prey diets provide vitamin D. Follow the fixture maker's distance guidance.

• Do not use visible bright light overnight. If supplemental night heat is needed, use a non-light-emitting source on a thermostat.

Do not reduce ventilation to raise humidity. Improve substrate moisture, water availability or enclosure design while keeping air exchange.

5. Substrate, Humid Hide and Cleaning

Substrate choices

Use a clean, reptile-safe substrate that holds some moisture without staying soaked, such as cypress mulch, coconut fiber/chips or an appropriate soil-based mix. Paper towels or paper can be useful during quarantine or illness. Avoid cedar and pine shavings, dusty or scented products, and substrate that is visibly moldy. Follow a reptile veterinarian's advice if the snake is being treated.

Daily and weekly routine

• Daily: check temperatures and humidity, refresh clean drinking water, and remove feces, urates, shed and soiled substrate.

• Weekly or as needed: wash the water bowl and wipe visible grime; check corners, hide undersides and seals for pests or mold.

• At intervals appropriate to substrate and enclosure: replace soiled substrate and clean furnishings. Follow disinfectant label contact time, then rinse and dry fully before the animal returns.

• Never mix cleaning products. Keep the snake away from fumes and wet chemical surfaces. Wash hands after cleaning or handling.

Salmonella hygiene

Reptiles can carry Salmonella without appearing ill. Wash hands with soap and water after touching the snake, enclosure, water bowl or prey. Keep reptile equipment out of food-preparation areas. Adults should supervise children; people at higher risk of severe infection should avoid direct contact and ask a clinician about precautions.

6. Feeding and Nutrition

What to feed

Offer a whole, appropriately sized rodent, usually frozen-thawed mouse or rat. The prey should not be wider than the snake's widest body point; many keepers also use body-weight and body-condition trends to choose prey. A reptile veterinarian can tailor prey size and interval, especially for a growing, overweight, underweight or medically fragile snake.

General routine (not a rigid prescription)

Life stage	Common starting interval	Adjustment cue
Growing juvenile	About every 7 days, sometimes 7-10 days	Steady growth without rapid excess fat; follow recorded weights
Subadult / adult	Often about every 10-21 days depending on size, prey and body condition	Avoid frequent large meals and obesity; adjust with vet guidance
Shed cycle / recent move	May refuse a meal	Keep routine calm; do not force-feed

Use feeding tongs and thaw frozen prey safely in a sealed container in the refrigerator, then warm it before offering. Do not microwave or leave thawed rodents at room temperature for long periods. Never feed live rodents when frozen-thawed prey is accepted; live prey can bite and seriously injure the snake. Remove uneaten prey promptly.

Keep a log: date, prey type and size, feeding response, shed, weight and any regurgitation. Do not handle for at least 24-48 hours after a meal, and longer if the snake is stressed or digestion is slow.

7. Water, Hydration and Bathing

Fresh water every day

Provide clean water at all times. Use a stable bowl that is easy to disinfect and large enough for voluntary soaking, but not so deep or unstable that it creates a hazard. Clean and refill daily, and whenever soiled. Correct humidity and hydration matter more than routine baths.

Does a ball python need a bath?

No scheduled bath is needed for a healthy ball python. Voluntary soaking in its own clean water bowl is normal. Repeated forced soaking can be stressful and does not solve the underlying cause of poor sheds, dehydration, mites or illness. First check humidity, water access, temperatures and enclosure hygiene.

If a veterinarian advises a soak

• Use a secure, escape-proof tub with a small amount of shallow lukewarm water, never hot; the snake must be able to keep its head above water easily.

• Supervise continuously, keep the session brief, and dry the snake gently before returning it to a properly heated enclosure.

• Do not add soap, oils, salts, vitamins or disinfectants. Do not pull retained shed or eye caps.

• For retained shed, mites, constipation, suspected dehydration or unusual soaking behavior, contact a reptile veterinarian; do not treat the symptom with repeated baths.

If the snake is soaking constantly, it may be overheated, dehydrated or reacting to parasites or other illness. Check setup and contact a vet if it continues.

8. Handling, Temperament and Other Pets

Low-stress handling

• Let a new snake settle for about 1-2 weeks and establish feeding before routine handling, unless the veterinarian advises otherwise.

• Handle with calm, slow movements and support the body at multiple points. Avoid grabbing the head or dangling the snake. Keep sessions brief at first and stop if it repeatedly tries to flee, freezes rigidly, hisses, or curls tightly.

• Avoid handling during the blue-eyed shed phase, immediately after feeding, when ill, or when the snake is unusually defensive.

• Wash hands before and after; do not handle if your hands smell like prey. Never handle while standing over an open enclosure or near stairs.

Children and household pets

A ball python may become accustomed to careful handling, but should never be left with a child. Adults must supervise every interaction and keep handling low to the ground. Dogs, cats, birds and other reptiles are not companions. Keep the enclosure locked and in a room where other pets cannot approach, paw at, or stress the snake. Never allow direct contact or introductions.

Household safety

• Use a child-resistant or lockable enclosure and keep a responsible adult as the designated keeper.

• Do not let a snake roam freely in the home; it can escape, chill, be crushed or encounter toxic substances.

• Provide a secure carrier for transport and prevent access to household chemicals or prey storage.

9. Shedding and Normal Behavior

What a normal shed looks like

Before shedding, many ball pythons become dull, their eyes turn cloudy or blue, and they hide more or refuse food. The eyes may clear again shortly before the skin comes off. A healthy shed is usually one connected piece, including eye caps and tail tip, but a shed can tear without indicating disease if all skin is released.

Support a clean shed

• Maintain suitable humidity throughout the year and ensure the snake can access fresh water.

• Offer a clean humid hide; replace damp material before it grows mold.

• Avoid frequent handling while eyes are cloudy or the snake is actively shedding.

• After shedding, check the body, tail tip and eye caps visually. If shed is retained, correct husbandry and ask a reptile vet before attempting removal.

Normal shy behavior vs concern

Hiding for much of the day, exploring at night, tongue flicking, and occasional short-term food refusal during adjustment or shed may be normal. A ball python does not need to be active in front of people to be healthy. A persistent change in behavior, weight, breathing, posture or skin deserves attention.

Never peel skin, pull an eye cap, or apply oils. These can damage scales and eyes; let a reptile veterinarian assess retained material.

10. Health Checks and Warning Signs

Call a reptile veterinarian promptly

• Open-mouth breathing, wheezing, bubbles or mucus at the nose/mouth, repeated stretching of the neck to breathe, or labored breathing. Breathing trouble is urgent.

• Regurgitation, repeated vomiting, swelling, abnormal stool, blood, persistent diarrhea, or a prolapse at the vent.

• Sudden weight loss, a thin or sharply triangular body, persistent refusal in a growing juvenile, or refusal accompanied by illness signs.

• Mites (tiny moving dark specks), blisters, burns, sores, retained shed or eye caps, mouth redness, discharge, or abnormal lumps.

• Weakness, poor coordination, inability to right itself, unusual head tilt, or marked lethargy.

What to do while arranging care

• Keep the snake in its normal, correctly measured temperature gradient; do not overheat it.

• Bring photos of the enclosure, equipment labels, temperature/humidity readings, feeding and weight records, and a fresh stool sample if available.

• Do not give human medication, leftover antibiotics, supplements or home remedies. Do not force-feed or use a bath as treatment.

Open-mouth breathing, significant bleeding, severe weakness, prolapse, suspected burn, or repeated regurgitation needs urgent veterinary advice.

11. Veterinary Care and Prevention

Visit schedule

Arrange an initial exam soon after acquisition (ideally within the first week or two) with a veterinarian experienced in reptiles. Many veterinary hospitals recommend annual preventive exams; follow your clinician's advice about frequency and fecal testing. A new animal may need a fecal parasite screen and follow-up based on results. Routine vaccines are not generally used for pet snakes.

Prepare for the appointment

• Ask whether the clinician regularly treats snakes and ball pythons. ARAV's veterinarian directory can help locate reptile-experienced practices.

• Bring feeding, shedding, weight and stool records; photos of the entire habitat; and exact thermostat, lamp and UVB model information.

• Ask about ideal body condition, prey schedule, parasite screening, quarantine and an emergency plan.

• Transport in a secure ventilated container with absorbent lining; protect from temperature extremes.

Prevention at home

Weigh the snake periodically using a secure container on a digital scale. Record weight monthly during growth, and less often in stable adults as advised. Track body condition rather than trying to make the snake grow quickly. Check equipment function, thermostat probes and enclosure locks every day.

The guide is educational, not a diagnosis. A reptile veterinarian should evaluate symptoms and set individualized treatment.

12. Costs: Setup and Ongoing Care

Approximate U.S. planning ranges (November 2026)

Expense	Planning range	Notes
Secure adult enclosure and furnishings	$200-$600+	Size, materials, doors and shipping change the price
Heat, thermostat, thermometers, hygrometer	$80-$200+	Do not cut cost on thermostat or measurement tools
Substrate, hides, bowl and decor	$40-$150	Some items need replacement or upgrades
Initial complete setup	$300-$800+	Before buying the animal; higher with custom PVC
Rodents and routine consumables	$15-$50/month	Bulk frozen prey may lower per-meal cost; delivery/storage vary
Routine reptile exam	$75-$250+	Fecal testing and diagnostics often cost extra
Emergency care reserve	$500-$1,500+	Treatment, imaging or hospitalization can exceed this

These are broad estimates, not clinic quotes. Prices vary by region, enclosure size, shipping, energy costs, and whether the snake needs diagnostics or treatment. Request an itemized estimate from a reptile veterinarian and keep an emergency fund separate from the purchase budget.

Monthly planning

Budget for electricity, frozen prey, substrate, disinfectant, replacement bulbs, and transport. Keep enough freezer space for prey and a backup plan for power outages. A low purchase price does not reduce the cost of suitable lifetime care.

13. Travel, Emergencies and Long-Term Planning

Travel and power outage plan

• Identify a trusted adult who can check temperatures, water and locks; do not ask an untrained person to change heating settings.

• Keep the reptile vet and nearest emergency clinic numbers accessible. Confirm which clinic sees snakes after hours.

• During a power outage, keep enclosure doors closed and use a safe, veterinarian-approved backup plan. Never place the snake directly against a heating pad or hot water bottle.

• For travel, use a secure ventilated carrier; avoid temperature extremes and long unnecessary trips.

Life-stage planning

Plan for adult-sized housing, changing prey size and ongoing vet care. Ball pythons can live for decades, so include relocation, college, moves, family changes and the possibility that the original keeper may be unable to continue care. Arrange a responsible rehoming contact in advance; never release the snake outdoors.

Responsible sourcing and records

Keep breeder or rescue documentation, feeding history, morph/lineage records if supplied, vet invoices and enclosure equipment instructions. Check relevant wildlife and transport rules before buying or moving across state lines.

Quick daily and weekly routine

Daily	Check warm/cool temperature, humidity, thermostat, water, locks and animal condition; spot-clean.
Weekly	Clean the bowl and visible surfaces; inspect hides and humid hide; record feeding and shed events.
Monthly	Record weight and body condition; check thermostat, probes, cords, seals and UVB fixture.

15. Sources and Important Notes

Book named by the owner

Donald S. Coleman, *Ball Python Care Guide for Beginners* (ISBN 9798194884995; listing describes a 2026 paperback). This guide is an original educational summary and does not reproduce the book's text.

Veterinary and husbandry references

PetMD, Ball Python Care Sheet - enclosure, temperature, humidity, diet, cleaning and veterinary warning signs.

Merck Veterinary Manual, Management and Husbandry of Reptiles - species housing, sanitation and feeding prey safely.

VCA Animal Hospitals, Veterinary Care: New Reptile Visit - initial and preventive reptile veterinary visits.

VCA Animal Hospitals, Owning a Pet Snake - snake handling, feeding, health and annual exams.

Exotic Pet Vets, Ball Pythons - ball python temperature, humidity, lighting, food and vet care.

Merck Veterinary Manual, Bacterial Diseases of Reptiles - respiratory disease signs and husbandry risk factors.

Limits and safe use

Care recommendations and costs vary. Where sources differ, this guide gives practical ranges and emphasizes measurement, secure choices and individualized veterinary advice. Laws and clinic fees can change. This guide is not a substitute for an examination or emergency care.

If your snake is ill or injured, contact a reptile-experienced veterinarian. Do not delay urgent care to try a home remedy.