



Owning a Pet Snake

General Information

Several species of snakes are commonly kept as pets. These include king snakes, garter snakes, Burmese pythons, various boa constrictors, and ball pythons. The needs of your particular species may differ from the needs of the generic "snake", so be sure to discuss any particulars with your veterinarian. The ball python will be used for this discussion, as it is one of the most common if not the most common species of pet snakes. Most of the information concerning the ball python is applicable to other terrestrial snake species.

Most snakes sold as pets are easy to handle and are usually non-aggressive. Many, especially the ball python, may not eat for weeks to months after the stress of going to a new environment. This can be normal, or can be a sign of a more serious disease that requires prompt veterinary attention.

Ideally, captive-bred animals should be purchased as pets. Wild caught snakes are less tolerant of stress, more likely to refuse to feed, and often harbor internal and external parasites.

Male and female snakes look identical; your veterinarian can carefully probe the cloacal area to determine the sex of your new pet. Hatchling ball pythons are about a foot long and grow to about 3 feet by 3 years of age. At maturity (reached in 3-5 years), adults reach 5-6 feet in length. Depending upon their care, ball pythons can live 10-20 years.

How do snakes differ anatomically from other pets?

- Most snakes have only one functional, simple lung (usually the right lung). The lung extends most of the snake's entire body length.
- Snakes have a cloaca, a common opening for the urinary, digestive, and genital tracts. By inserting a special probe in the cloacal area, a veterinarian can tell the sex of your snake.
- Snakes have no limbs; many people feel the spurs that are present in the cloacal region of some snakes represent vestigial limbs.

- Snakes have numerous pairs of ribs.
- Snakes have a three-chambered heart; people, dogs, and cats have four-chambered hearts.
- Snakes have no diaphragm; this prevents coughing and airway clearance, and snakes with simple respiratory infections easily develop pneumonia because of this. Respiratory infections in reptiles are always more serious than similar infections in mammals.
- Males have two reproductive organs called hemipenes.
- Snakes have spectacles instead of eyelids.

How do I select a snake?

Most owners buy snakes locally from a pet store, although mail ordering from reptile breeders is also common. If you buy a pet through the mail, make sure you know what you're getting! Ask about a guarantee if the pet isn't what you want.

Young, captive-raised animals make the best pets. Older imported animals are harder to tame, may harbor internal parasites, and often suffer from the stress of captivity. Avoid sick-looking animals. Don't try to be a "Good Samaritan." Many sickly-looking snakes are terminally ill. Trying to nurse a sick snake back to health after purchasing it will rarely work. Just the stress of a new environment is often enough to kill a sick snake.

Start out right with a healthy pet. Avoid snakes that appear skinny, have loose skin or sunken eyes, and appear inactive or lethargic. A healthy snake is usually bright, active, and alert. The eyes should be clear; cloudy eyes usually indicate the snake is about to shed. While not a sign of illness, shedding is very stressful to snakes and it would be best to purchase a snake that is not about to shed. As you examine the eyes, check for mites, which are tiny black dots that often move. Make sure no lumps or bumps are present; simply running your hands slowly down the snake's body will allow you to detect any swellings. The vent or cloaca should be clean and free of wetness or stool stuck to it. If possible, GENTLY open the mouth. There should be a small amount of clear saliva present, and a pink tongue and oral cavity. Mucus that is cloudy or "cottage cheese" in appearance is a sign of mouth rot, as is redness or pinpoint hemorrhages on the mucus membranes. Always inquire about the guarantee in case the snake is found to be unhealthy.

My snake looks healthy? Does he need to see the veterinarian?

Within 48 hours of your purchase, your snake should be examined by a qualified reptile veterinarian. The visit includes determining the animal's weight, as well as checking for lumps and bumps. The animal is examined for signs of dehydration and starvation. A fecal test is done to check for internal parasites. Many veterinarians consider all snakes (even those bred in captivity) to have some type

of parasite, so your snake may be routinely dewormed. The oral cavity is examined for signs of infectious stomatitis (mouth rot). No vaccines are required for snakes. Your doctor may recommend blood tests, cultures, or radiographs (X-rays) to check for other diseases. If all turns out well, your snake will be given a clean bill of health. Like all pets, snakes should be examined and have their feces tested for parasites annually.