

Ball Python Won't Eat

How can I get my ball python to eat?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Q. I take care of a ball python we keep as part of our lab's living vertebrate collection at my university. From everything I know, ball pythons seem to be finicky eaters, but I've exhausted every possible avenue I know to bring this ball python out of a 3-month fast. He is not losing mass, but I'm still worried. I've tried raising the humidity and oil baths, which seem to help the ball python shed but have no effect on feeding. I've monitored temperature, although we've been battling boiler problems. I've even tried feeding the ball python in the dark. Our university does not allow us to use live mice for feeding, so I use mice thawed in hot water with a beef bouillon cube. The ball python has a separate feeding enclosure but, nowadays, he's mostly interested in escaping from it. Is there anything else I can do for him? Thanks.

Rachel

A. I am concerned about the habitat's temperature range. If your facility is battling problems with heating the room in which the ball python's habitat is kept, then you need to make sure his cage has the appropriate heating equipment to keep his area warm enough.

Ball pythons are often very shy snakes, and they are nocturnal, so they will do best if offered their prey item at night, in the dark. You should be feeding your ball python at night – you said you even tried feeding him in the dark, but you didn't say if this occurred at night. It is best to leave a ball python alone to eat, and try not to disturb it at feeding time. I don't think you need a separate feeding enclosure, but your ball python should have a hide box or some sort of visual barrier so he is afforded some privacy for mealtimes. Some ball pythons will feed better in an appropriate-sized paper bag.

Also, make sure you are keeping your ball python within the correct temperature gradient – 75 degrees Fahrenheit at night and 85 to 90 degrees during the day, with a focal hot spot of 95 degrees – and humidity – 70 to 80 percent relative humidity. You should have several accurate digital thermometers/hygrometers located near the bottom of the enclosure where your ball python hangs out to ensure he is warm enough. A sluggish/lethargic snake is not likely to eat. Make sure your ball python has a container filled with water and that it is large enough for him to entirely soak himself whenever he wishes.

Some ball pythons are wild-caught. In the wild, they are specialized nocturnal predators. They will fast when prey is not available for a period of time, so if one hasn't been fed in a while due to shipping, it might go into a fast.

If your ball python is wild-caught, it is difficult to provide it with the same food items it is used to catching and consuming in the wild, so it may not identify the classic white mouse often used as a food item here in the United States as something edible. For a wild-caught ball python, it might help to try a brown mouse, gerbil, hamster or other type of non-white rodent of appropriate size. A natural prey item for wild ball pythons is the African soft-furred rat, and the good news is that some rodent breeders have identified this rodent as being important to the reptile trade and have started breeding them as prey items for ball pythons in particular. Perhaps you can locate a couple of these rats in order to entice your ball python to start eating again.

Wild-caught ball pythons also usually have problems from parasite infestation, and some have low-grade bacterial or protozoal infections as well. A qualified herp veterinarian should be consulted in order to diagnose and treat these kinds of problems.

Many people assume that because ball pythons are docile and not prone to striking and biting people, they enjoy being handled. This is not usually the case. I don't know if your ball python is handled regularly as part of the program you are involved with. Because wild ball pythons are shy and spend a great deal of time underground in jumping mouse burrows, they may be uncomfortable being handled and may feel exposed in a habitat without areas accessible for hiding. Flower pots and hide boxes are vital for ball pythons, especially wild-caught ones, to provide them with the necessary security. Handling may cause a wild-caught ball python to go off feed, and the more frequently they are handled, the longer it may take for them to begin feeding.

Imported ball pythons typically go into a fast between November and April, while all ball pythons usually go off feed during the winter breeding season. Also, female ball pythons will not feed when gravid – developing and holding eggs – and

while brooding eggs. Many adult, imported ball pythons will not begin feeding for six to 12 months after being brought into this country.

As long as their weight is maintaining, adult ball pythons can, and often do, go several months without feeding; however, hatchlings can get into trouble and may actually starve to death within several months if they don't eat.

It would be a good idea to get a good quality scale that weighs in grams and start charting your ball python's weight weekly. This is a good idea for all herpers, as subtle changes in their weight can warn you of a potential problem.

When writing in with a question, it really helps me tremendously if you can provide me with specific information about your pet herp's cage temperature gradient, the focal hot spot temperature, humidity level, cage substrate, if you provide UVB fluorescent lighting, normal diet and any other pertinent information. If you are unable to provide that information, it usually means you do not have the correct equipment to properly care for your pet herp, as thermometers and hygrometers are vital to be able to ascertain if you are keeping your herp within the proper temperature parameters.

It would have helped me if you had told me exactly what your ball python had eaten when he did consume a prey item. It also helps to know if a ball python is a captive-bred or wild-caught specimen, as wild-caught ball pythons may not be used to eating white mice or rats and may be enticed to eat either brown mice or rats or brown gerbils, which may look more like the native rodents they consume in the wild.

If you have made all the changes I have recommended and your ball python still won't eat, you should make an appointment with a qualified herp veterinarian so he can undergo a complete physical exam and any necessary tests. Also, if you can take in a fresh fecal sample – you can refrigerate it until you get to the veterinarian's office – that would help facilitate fecal testing. Or, if you are concerned your ball python is losing weight, it certainly wouldn't be a bad thing to schedule an appointment with a herp veterinarian at this time.

Need a Herp Vet?

If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking the list of members on the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarian (ARAV) website at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact. Or, check out the state by state ReptileChannel Vet Listings.