

Feeding Ball Pythons

How can I feed my baby ball python? My snake doesn't seem to want to eat or may be traumatized from being bitten.

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

Note: I get many questions about ball pythons not eating. This is a very common problem with this species. Because many hatchling ball pythons are imported into this country, many not yet established eating, and wild-caught adults are also imported, which also have eating issues, I thought I would devote this column to the problems with ball pythons, and how to encourage them to eat. ~ Dr. Wissman

I have a baby ball python and an adult ball python. I took my baby python Patrick to the pet store for help, and they were stumped. We figured that he must have been bitten by his food, and now he won't eat. The pet store tried to pre-kill his food, and he still wouldn't eat. What should I do?

What made you think that your baby ball python (*Python regius*) was bitten by its prey? Did you see wounds, bite marks or any signs of injury? I am also confused, as baby ball pythons are usually offered pinky, fuzzy or hopper mice, which aren't very likely to injure a snake. Were you offering your snake adult mice? Those are more likely to bite a snake.

While pet store employees can be very helpful when dealing with husbandry issues, they are not trained in veterinary medicine. It is always a good idea to seek out the assistance of a veterinarian who has training in herp medicine if your pet store employees are stumped. Veterinarians have four years of undergraduate education, then four years of veterinary school, then additional training in reptiles and amphibians in order to work with your pet herps.

This is a good lesson for everyone: You should never leave a live prey item (other than a pinky mouse that cannot bite a snake) unattended with a snake or carnivorous lizard. If the herp does not readily consume the mouse or rat, it is possible for serious, life-threatening injuries to occur. I have seen rare pythons completely chewed up along their backs — wounds inflicted by hungry, bored or scared rodents.

The python's skin and muscle are often chewed and eaten, which leaves potentially large, gaping wounds that cannot be sutured closed due to lack of tissue and the danger of sealing in infection. If live prey must be fed, the herper should be right there watching the snake or lizard to ensure that the prey is eaten immediately (unless the reptile is being offered a benign juvenile rodent). If the rodent is not consumed within a reasonable amount of time, it should be removed. To prevent disease transmission, this rodent should not be offered to another snake.

It is much safer for your herps if you can train them to consume dead prey items. There are many great papers that explain how to convert a snake over from live to killed prey. Once you have your herps consuming dead rodents, feeding becomes much simpler, as you can purchase pre-killed frozen rodents that I guarantee will never bite or traumatize your herps!

My bigger concern is that perhaps your baby ball python has not been feeding for you at all. Has it eaten since you purchased it? Many baby ball pythons are imported into this country, having been hatched in their country of origin. Many of these hatchling snakes have undergone quite a bit of stress and overcrowding prior to ending up in a pet store or a home situation. Many of them are not actively feeding when initially purchased. If Patrick hasn't eaten since you acquired it, then this is a definite worry.

It can be very difficult to get a baby ball python feeding on its own. Ball pythons are often very shy snakes, and they are nocturnal, so they do best if offered their prey item at night, in the dark. It is best to leave a ball python alone to eat and try not to disturb it at feeding time. Some ball pythons feed better in a small paper bag. Make sure that your snake has a hide box and other visual barriers to make it feel more secure in its environment. Also, make sure that you are keeping your snake within the correct temperature gradient (75 degrees Fahrenheit at night and 85 to 90 degrees during the day, with a hot spot of 95 degrees) and humidity (70 to 80 percent relative humidity).

Some young ball pythons are wild-caught. In the wild, they are specialized nocturnal predators. They 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. Because we cannot provide them with the same food items that they are used to catching and consuming in the wild, they 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 nonwhite rodent of appropriate size. Wild-caught ball pythons also usually have problems due to parasites, and some have low-grade bacterial or protozoal infections. 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 that they enjoy being handled. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case. Because they are shy and spend a great deal of time underground in jumping mouse burrows, they may be uncomfortable being handled and exposed in a habitat without areas for it to hide. Flower pots and hideboxes are vital for ball pythons, especially wild-caught ones, to provide them with the necessary security. Handling may cause a wild-caught to go off feed and the more frequently that 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, females do not feed when gravid (developing and holding eggs) and while brooding eggs. Many adult, imported ball pythons do not begin feeding for six to 12 months after being brought into this country.

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

You should make an appointment with a herp vet to have your ball python examined, diagnosed and treated, if necessary. Make sure that you are providing the proper temperature range, humidity and security (flower pots, hide boxes, etc.). For the time being, stop handling Patrick entirely.

If your snake checks out medically (and be sure to allow your vet to perform any necessary tests), then work on getting Patrick to eat on its own. Offer food when it is most active or right after a shed. Your snake may indicate that it is ready to feed when it sticks its head out of its hide box while flicking its tongue. You can try offering a fuzzy rat or fuzzy mouse, leaving one or more in the cage overnight (and causing the least amount of disturbance possible when placing the food items in the cage). Don't check on it or try to watch it eat. Any movement outside of the habitat might put it off of feeding for that night. If Patrick doesn't eat by morning, take the prey out and try again the next night or in a few more days.

Another technique to try is to create a rodent "nest" by placing a few rodent droppings, nest material and some rodent hair into an empty hide box, along with a few baby rodents of appropriate size. A curious and hungry ball python may go hunting and discover the rodent nest, and then consume a baby rodent or two. As previously discussed, you can also try a fuzzy in a brown paper bag overnight with your snake.

Once you have addressed any medical and parasitic problems with your herp vet, if your baby ball python is losing weight or if you can't convince Patrick to eat on its own (after attempting several of these techniques), you can ask your herp vet to force-feed your snake. Don't try to force-feed a baby snake on your own, unless you are experienced in this technique, as it is possible to injure your snake, or possibly even cause its demise. Several force-feedings (at least three or four) may actually induce a snake to begin feeding on its own. While your snake is being force-fed, it should not be handled, except as necessary for cage cleaning. Make sure it always has a bowl of fresh water to soak in and drink from. Be sure that you follow the recommendations of your herp vet and stay in contact with him or her for any follow-up care that is recommended.

Hopefully, with the help of your herp veterinarian, you will be able to figure out why Patrick isn't eating and take steps to solve the problem. I hope this information has been helpful to you and to other ball python owners.

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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) web site at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.