

Pythons

Carpet Python *Morelia spilota*

Pythons are active day and night.



CAUTION: Large pythons can deliver a painful and bloody bite.

HOUSING: Pythons are best housed separately, except when breeding. Young pythons to one metre can be adequately housed indoors in a top-ventilated vivarium of 60 x 30 x 50 cm high. Larger adults require a minimum of about 100 x 50 x 100 cm high to allow climbing. A guide is half the length of the python for the width of the cage by a quarter of the python for the height of the cage. Wire fronted cages are unsuitable for snakes. Enclosures must be secure and escape proof.

CAPTIVE ENVIRONMENT: Cage furnishings should be kept simple and include strong climbing branches and a hide box constructed so you can access the snake at any time. Try not to clutter up the cage too much. The floor covering should be easily removed for cleaning. Some alternatives are newspaper, pea-gravel, woodchips and indoor-outdoor loop-pile carpet. Do not use sand or soil, as this is unsuitable and will harbour disease-causing pathogens. Include a hide box, such as a commercially available bird-nesting box, to allow the snake to retreat.

TEMPERATURE & LIGHTING: All species like to bask beneath a spotlight for several hours each day during the cooler months, however a commercially available heat pad should be included to allow access to a warm place at all times, unless cooling off for breeding. The heat source needs to be positioned at one end of the vivarium so that there is a gradient of temperatures so that the snake can maintain a preferred body temperature by moving backwards and forwards. The basking spot should reach about 34° and the far end of the cage should be about 20°C. There must be a physical barrier between the python and the basking lamp to prevent burns.

WATER: Water should be provided at all times in a solid non-spillable container. Pythons may bathe or soak often so use a container large enough to accommodate the snake and water.



FOOD: Young pythons will become very active when hungry and require feeding every 7 – 10 days. Adults feed immediately after each defaecation. Adults may be fed as many thawed rodents as they will eat but be observant as some individuals may become obese if food is unrestricted. It is far better to feed fewer large meals than many small ones. Juveniles will take thawed fuzzy to weaner mice. Adult snakes may feed regularly for several months and then abstain from eating for long periods, occasionally for as long as twelve months. If the snake is reluctant to take food off the floor, offer it held in tongs. Remember, they are low energy specialists spending most of their time doing nothing.

CAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR: Young pythons may be nervous and bite. Most will settle and tolerate handling, although this should be kept to minimum. Never grip the snake and restrict its movement during handling as it will become alarmed. Do not handle a snake for several days after it has eaten, nor when in pre-slough condition - that is from commencement of "milky" eyes until it has shed its skin. Probing by an experienced person can determine sex. Female carpet pythons get much bigger than males (250 v. 180 cm).

BREEDING: Breeding success is improved by allowing a cooling off period in both sexes for a month or so in winter. Mating occurs in mid winter to early spring with eggs being deposited in early to late summer. Sexually active male Black-headed and Stimson's Pythons demonstrate intraspecific fighting that includes biting and thrashing and can inflict serious injuries to each other.

PROBLEMS: Wheezing is not uncommon in pythons during pre-slough, although if it continues then it may suggest respiratory infection. Try raising cage temperature to at least 35°C, but if problem persists seek veterinary assistance.

Adhered skin after sloughing is common in dry environments when humidity is too low. Try a larger water container. The adhered skin is easily removed after soaking the snake in wet bag for twenty minutes or so. Lack of appetite may be normal seasonal fasting, but is also caused by too low a cage temperature. Regurgitation can also be a sign that the snake cannot get warm enough to digest its food.

DISEASES: A clean artificial environment with the appropriate husbandry mentioned above will usually result in your pet reptile remaining healthy. Quarantine newly acquired animals for at least a month before introducing them to those already being kept.



REPTILE MITES: Reptile mites are the scourge of many keepers. They can rapidly multiply and quickly kill a reptile. If an infestation is found, it is imperative that you take immediate action to eradicate it. Although small (a large female may be one-third the size of a pin head) they will be obvious on white paper as miniature black tick-like animals. If you find you have an infestation, it is important to kill it in situ. Ring Dr Mike on (07) 4151 3550 if you need help.

TICKS: When first obtaining your reptile, check it for ticks. These are often seen tucked up under the scales. They can be removed using tweezers and the bite site dabbed with antiseptic.

FURTHER READING: Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity – John Weigel. Reptile Keepers Association, Gosford, NSW.