

# Should You Feed Frozen/Thawed or Live?

By Jay A. Martin

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Dec 23, 2005

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## The Debate

The debate between feeding frozen/thawed (F/T) versus live has been ongoing for quite a long time. I suspect the two major reasons keepers feed live are because it's easier and less waste (un-eaten meals). On the other hand, I believe it is safety and convenience that influence keepers to feed F/T.

Some reptiles are better feeders of F/T than others. For example, boas are voracious feeders of F/T while Ball Pythons are for the most part, finicky feeders that keep many keepers guessing why they won't eat this time. F/T for the boa keeper makes perfect sense. However, Ball Python keepers have a more difficult time getting their Ball Pythons feeding consistently.

The purpose of this document is to explore and evaluate these two feeding methods in an attempt to inform keepers of the pros and cons of each. While it might seem as though I prefer one method to the other, I believe both methods may prove useful at different times. However, I do believe feeding a dead rodent to your reptile is the safest option of feeding. You, as the keeper, must balance safety, health and comfort for your reptile. Below, is a short list of some of the reasons both camps choose one method over the other.

F/T	Live
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Safety – no attacks</li><li>• Healthier – parasites/bacteria are frozen</li><li>• Convenience</li><li>• Eats F/T is a selling point</li><li>• Widely available</li><li>• No rodent feces in cage</li><li>• No need to retrieve a panicked rodent (possible bite)</li><li>• No chance of a live rodent loose in the house</li><li>• Easier to administer medications</li><li>• No gnawed cages</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nutrient loss from freezing</li><li>• Thawing is time-consuming</li><li>• Picky feeders will not take F/T</li><li>• No wasted food</li><li>• Spouse – “No rats in my freezer!”</li><li>• “Teasing” is time-consuming</li><li>• Rodents can be raised to the needed size</li><li>• Breed your own &amp; sell surplus</li></ul>

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## ***Feeding F/T is Safer***

Live rodents can harm your reptiles by biting and in extreme cases, killing your reptile (see figure 1). Many keepers leave live rodents in with their reptile overnight. This can be dangerous, however, not a problem with F/T. A F/T rodent does not feel the need to protect itself and as a result, does not attack your reptile. Furthermore, removing a panicked rodent can be hazardous to the keeper as well as the reptile. I have opened a cage on more than one occasion to have a panicked rat jump out at me. One bite to your reptile can “turn off” a feeding response for months! One thing I can promise you: a dead rodent will not attack your reptile.



**Figure 1**

Used by permission from [www.proexotics.com](http://www.proexotics.com).

This level of damage is not repairable. The only ethical and responsible thing to do at this point is to euthanize the animal. It is not my intent to show you what could happen every time you feed live. This is just an example of an extreme attack from a rodent that was likely left unattended overnight with the Ball Python. Some keepers will say, “*I always feed live and have never had any problems.*” What concerns many responsible keepers, is that this comment is irresponsible and shows ignorance of the possibilities: bite to the eye, mouth or other part of the body. That fact that it could happen should outweigh the benefits of feeding live. It’s a numbers game. Eventually, it’s going to happen.

Feeding F/T is less stressful. (I make this statement through first-hand experience through observation.) In the wild, an encounter between a reptile and rodent is brief. Either the reptile attacks quickly, or it (or rodent) departs. In captivity, neither has the option to

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escape. This can create a stressful situation for both animals. With F/T, your reptile does not feel the need to escape and as a result, does not feel the stress that comes with feeding live – neither feels cornered.

## **Convenience**

Convenience is a matter of opinion. For those feeding F/T, it means not having to go to the pet store to get this weeks meals or trying to figure out where to put live uneaten rodents. For those feeding F/T, it's a simple process of opening a freezer, thawing a rodent and putting it in the reptile's cage. For those feeding live, convenience means removing an uneaten meal to be used later (as opposed to throwing it away), or not having to "tease" a reptile with a dead rodent on the end of hemostats.

I find F/T very convenient for the reasons I just listed. I find access to live rodents as an inconvenience. Live rodent supply can be anywhere from unending to "hit-n-miss", to none at all. Obviously, your access to live rodents will play a large role in your feeding plan. If you do not have access to live rodents at all, then it is quite clear that F/T is needed. If your supply is "hit-n-miss", then you may end up feeding your reptile(s) less often than you might like if only feeding live. You need to find a consistent source of food for your reptiles.

How far do you currently drive for your live rodents? When I have to supplement my breeding colony, I drive just 10 minutes each way. Ultimately, it takes up 30 minutes of my time. Not too much, but more than I would like. I have heard from many keepers that they drive in excess of one hour each way to get their rodents. I like the convenience of having F/T rodents shipped to my door once every 3 months.

Live rodents are not as accessible for me – especially, since I live in an area where it is not conducive to breeding rodents, hot muggy Florida. With F/T, you can choose from a wide assortment of sizes and have them on-hand, when needed as opposed to trying to acquire the right sized live rodent. With F/T, you have no smell, and less space issues – fill a freezer rather than the space taken up for racks, supplies, etc.

## **Cost**

Pet store rodents are almost always overpriced. Often, the price of the rodent is one size more than the rodent itself. For example, my local pet store sells small rats at medium prices. At \$2.50 per rat, it quickly becomes too expensive to feed my reptiles. If you are only feeding one or two reptiles, this isn't much of a problem. Breeding your own rodents reduces the cost of live considerably. We'll discuss this later. F/T rodents are widely available and shipping costs are still considerably less than live prices from a pet store. Like anything in bulk, the more you buy, the lower the cost per unit.

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There are other costs to keep in mind as well. Before switching to F/T, ensure your reptiles will eat F/T. You have not saved anything if you are throwing out half of your F/T supply because your reptile will not eat F/T or feeds sporadically on F/T.

## ***Breeding Your Own Rodents***

One of the reasons some people told me they feed live is because they breed their own rodents. This really isn't a reason to feed live, however, the breeder could still freeze the rodents she bred and then feed F/T.

Breeding your own rodents has a unique set of problems. It takes time and resources to maintain a breeding colony of rodents. You need caging, food and bedding (normally) in bulk. Cages need to be cleaned often to reduce the smell and maintain a healthy colony. This can take a considerable amount of time. In fact, I spend more time caring for my rodent colony than I do with my reptiles.

It takes a significant breeding colony to support even the smallest of reptile breeding programs. A single hatchling alone would consume 6 rat fuzzies and 12 rat pups in its first three months of life. Now, multiply this times 10 or more hatchlings and keep in mind, you have to allow some of these to grow into larger rats to feed your adult and sub-adult reptiles. It doesn't take long to go through your rat supply. It's also difficult to keep the right-sized stock available.

Further, breeding your own rodents takes up space that could be used for more reptiles and related supplies. Space used by a rodent breeding rack, could be used by a snake rack. A rodent colony also introduces the chance of respiratory issues for both the colony and its human caretakers. As an asthmatic, my breeding colony is a killer on my health. If you do decide to breed your own rodents, keep in mind, they can still be frozen. Further, breeding your own can be quite economical.

## ***Healthier?***

Both methods of feeding can pose health problems. Live rodents can transmit parasites, both internal and external. Internal parasites normally cannot be seen with the naked eye. Therefore, a microscope and trained eye are needed to identify these nasty little buggers. But who is going to test every live rodent before feeding? External parasites, such as fleas, may be seen – if you are looking. These external parasites can transmit bacteria and disease through bites. So a live rodent with fleas, for example, can result in infection in your reptile, not to mention a source of stress from the bite itself.

Freezing kills most harmful bacteria and parasites. Most internal and external parasites and bacteria die during the freezing process. If the parasites and bacteria are dead, then there is no chance of harm coming to your reptile. There is potential for nutrient loss

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through freezing, however. Unfortunately, you don't always know what you are getting when buying frozen rodents. It is possible to feed your reptile a tainted F/T rodent. Although, I believe this is rare and can be avoided by purchasing your rodents from a reputable source.

The only plausible reason for feeding live is avoid nutrient loss through freezing. While many believe this is not a problem, I have not seen any studies of nutrient loss from freezing rodents. You can always take your live rodents and pre-kill (P/K) them and offer this to your reptile. Although, this is not for the faint of heart and the rodent should be dispatched quickly and ethically.

Another argument for feeding live (again, not really a reason) is that the breeder of the rodent knows exactly what the rodent was fed. This is definitely beneficial, but again, these rodents can still be frozen.

## ***Administer Medications***

Hopefully, this is a rare occasion; however feeding F/T makes it easier and safer to administer oral medications. Typically, snakes that are fed live rodents must be subdued (held down) while a feeding tube is inserted into its throat. This is extremely stressful to the reptile and can result in injury. It normally takes two people to treat a reptile in this fashion, which requires finding someone you can rely on whenever it's time for medications. If you feed F/T, oral medications can be injected into the rodent and when the reptile feeds, it is unknowingly treated; no stress to the keeper or the reptile, and it does not require extra help.

There are some who feel that injecting medications into a dead rodent requires the full digestion of the rodent in order for the reptile being treated to get the full benefits of the medication. Further, this method of treatment would delay the absorption rate of the medications – which may or may not matter – into the reptile's "system".

## ***So which is it?***

Whatever works well for you and is best for the reptile. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Environment (cage, hides, substrate, etc.)
- Stress reduction (do not bug, feed daily, interrupt, traffic area, etc.)
- Feed an appropriate sized food item
- Proper feeding time – the evening usually works best
- Food preparation (heated, scented, etc.)
- Do not leave an unattended rodent for too long (if feeding live)

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One last key element to any feeding program – especially with the Ball Python – is consistency. Once a reptile is “dialed-in” on an appropriately sized meal, feeding becomes consistent. Obviously, a reptile that eats regularly will be healthier. Not to mention the reduced stress for the keeper. Consistent feeding will result in optimum growth. Feeding F/T can be time-consuming in the beginning, but it can payoff immensely once achieved.