



*Animal Ark Veterinary Hospital*

## **Hedgehog Care (African)**

Most of the hedgehogs that are kept in the United States as pets are from Africa. Their origin is the African Savanna, though none are brought in from the wild anymore. Most African pygmy hedgehogs, (*Atelerix* spp.) available are bred locally. These cute little creatures are fun and fascinating. The following paragraphs have some quick helpful hints on basic care.

### **Housing**

A wire cage, aquarium, or a plastic children's pool can be used to house your pet. A heavy food dish and a sipper water bottle attached to the side of the cage should be provided. Hedgies like to hide in burrows therefore a den is needed. A section of 4"-6" diameter PVC (plastic) plumbing pipe works well as a den or hide place. You can get this at almost any hardware or plumbing store. Some hedgies will use a shallow litter box or pan. Bedding should consist of hay, critter country, and aspen shavings or recycled newspaper bedding. Do not use cedar or pine shavings, they contain aromatic oils that cause irritation to the eyes, mucous membranes and respiratory tract. An exercise wheel is also recommended. It should have a solid cylinder so that the hedgies feet don't get caught. Hedgehogs tend to be surprisingly energetic, and need the chance to use up some of this energy.

### **Diet**

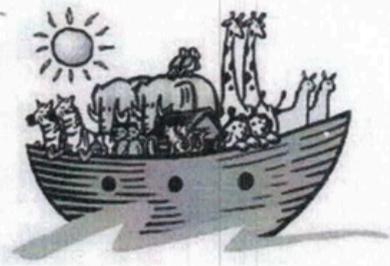
Hedgehogs are insectivores, and as a result are essentially carnivorous like cats, as opposed to guinea pigs, rabbits, and most small rodents, which are generally vegetarian. High quality cat or kitten food such as Hill's Science Diet or Iams, hedgehog maintenance diet (multiple sources) or ferret food (Marshall Farms is recommended. Both dry and canned food should be provided. They also eat earthworms, pinkie mice, and mealworms. Small amounts of beta-carotene rich veggies should also be provided.

### **Handling your Hedgehog**

You may be lucky enough to acquire a very friendly outgoing baby who accepts you almost instantly. Not all-new hedgehogs are so adaptable. Getting your hedgehog to become familiar with you will take patience. Spend more time holding him. He will get used to you and begin to relax. Hedgehogs have poor eyesight. They use smell as their primary sense. Your hedgie will learn to identify you by smell. The best way to do this is to spend time with your pet several times a day just gently holding it to allow it to adjust to you and learn to recognize your scent. Picking up a hedgehog, or otherwise handling him is difficult, at least until he gets to know your smell. Never wear gloves when handling your pet. This blocks your scent and confuses your pet.

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The best way to pick up a hedgehog is with one hand at each side of him, then bring your hands gently together to cup him. Never grasp a hedgehog in a way that could allow any of your fingers to be caught in the middle should he decide to roll into a ball. As your hedgehog adjusts to being held, it will come to you with his quills lying flat, allowing you to play with, and pet him.

### **Behavior**

If a hedgehog smells something interesting, it will often begin to contort itself, start foaming at the mouth and lick the foam onto its spines. This behavior is referred to as self-anointing. The snuffling or snorting while having the head tucked down is a defense mechanism. It leaves them with their quills protecting every bit of visible surface, but still allows the hedgehog to move. This behavior is usually accompanied by sudden lurches in the direction the hedgehog believes its potential enemy is in, to try and give it a good warning prickle. The more your hedgehog comes to know you, the less defensive it will become.

### **Hibernation**

A common concern is whether or not pet hedgehogs hibernate – especially as winter starts to arrive. The answer is generally no. However, if the temperature where they are kept drops too low (below 68 degrees F), they can start preparing for hibernation. If the temperature drops much below this the hog may hibernate for brief periods. If the hedgehog doesn't respond to stimulation then it needs to be warmed up. Another sign of a hedgehog that is too cool is going off its food. A chilled hedgehog will walk as if it is drunk. If your hedgehog isn't eating, and is walking a bit funny, it may be because he is too cool. These signs may also indicate serious illness. If these signs do not resolve when your hog is warmed up, contact your veterinarian immediately.

### **Breeding**

Hedgehogs as young as 6 weeks old can mate. If you do have young hogs, remember to separate them before this age if you do not want them to breed.

### **Health Concerns**

- **Sarcoptic mange:** Mites are fairly common skin parasites of hedgehogs. Signs of mite infestation include loss of quills, crusty deposits around the eyes, ears, and base of the quills. Treatment of the mites involves both injectable medication that kills the mites as they feed on the skin of the hedgehog and medicated baths performed once a week that

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kill the mites on the surface of the skin. While mites are not particularly difficult to treat, the problem causes discomfort to the pet and can become serious if left untreated.

- **Obesity:** Hedgehogs can easily become overweight, partially due to their potential for hibernation. They often gain weight in preparation for a lengthy hibernation that never comes. Letting them hibernate is NOT the answer -- a diet and exercise are. If your hedgehog is over weight, consult your veterinarian. Decrease in food intake, switching the diet to a light formula and increased exercise may be recommended.
- **Diarrhea:** Normal hedgehog droppings can range from almost pellet-like to quite soft and sticky. Color is usually very dark brown. Depending on diet, especially treats, they can vary quite a bit. If your hedgehog is having unusual droppings after having had a treat or change in diet a day or so before, then it is probably related to what he ate. If the problem continues (assuming the hedgehog is back on his normal diet), or if your hedgehog is suffering from severe diarrhea, contact your veterinarian immediately. Giardia is a common parasite of hedgies and should be treated.
- **Anorexia (not eating):** Loss of appetite is often the sign of either a sick, depressed, or especially a chilled hedgehog. They can also have severe periodontal disease. Remember, given a hedgehog's small size, not eating can become deadly in very short period of time. If the situation persists for more than a couple of days, contact your veterinarian.

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