

ANIMAL EMERGENCY CENTER

2100 W. Silver Spring Drive
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at the heart of critical care

Care of African Pygmy Hedgehogs

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Natural History:

Most of the pet hedgehogs found in the United States are descendants of animals living in Africa. African pygmy hedgehogs (*Atelerix albiventris*) are found from the southern Sahara Desert to the Congo and from Senegal to East Africa. They are most active at dusk and during the night. During the day they sleep under logs, rocks, tree roots, or brush piles, and they will dig burrows. They usually do not hibernate in the wild, but they can enter hibernation in captivity if temperatures drop below 65°F.

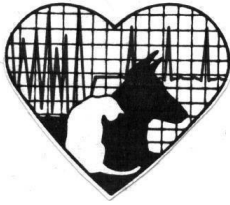
Special Characteristics:

- Life Span:** African pygmy hedgehogs reach sexual maturity at 6-8 months of age, although breeding may occur as early as 2 months. Gestation lasts 34-37 days. They are ready to wean at 6-8 weeks of age. In the wild they live 1-1 ½ years, but may live 5-8 years in captivity.
- Size:** They grow to about 6-8 inches, and are will become very wide when obese.
- Weight:** Weight can range from 250-700 grams, or just over ½ pound to over 1 ½ pounds.
- Anatomy:** Short, grooved spines completely cover the dorsum (top of the head and the back). Strong muscles under the skin allow hedgehogs to pull the spiny skin around them. The face and belly are covered by soft fur. The spines are prickly, but will not cause serious harm. Normal body temperature is only 95.2°F
- Temperament:** When frightened, hedgehogs will hiss, spit, and roll into a ball. They will also grunt and squeal. Pets will usually become very used to handling, especially if it begins at an early age. "Anting," or self-anointing is a very strange behavior where hedgehogs repeatedly lick an object, and then spread large amounts of saliva over their spiny shoulders.

Captive Care Requirements:

- Cage:** Glass or plastic walled enclosures are ideal, but sufficient ventilation must be provided. Wire flooring is not recommended because hedgehog feet can easily become entrapped. The cage may be no less than 10 by 20 inches for a single animal, if exercised regularly.
- Lighting:** Special lighting is not required, but day and night cycles of about 12 hours are important.
- Hide box:** A hiding place is required for sleep during the day. It may be made of cardboard, wood or plastic. Many people use 4" PVC pipe, cut boxes, or flowerpots.
- Bedding:** Bedding must be changed frequently to avoid irritation to the sensitive skin on hedgehog feet. Yesterday's News, Critter Country, CareFresh, hardwood shavings, and shredded newspaper are all acceptable bedding choices. Avoid cloth, towels, ground corn cobs, pine shavings, cedar, and cat-box litter. Some hedgehogs can be trained to use a litter box.
- Temperature:** They tolerate temperatures between 75°-85°F, very well. Hibernation might be initiated if temperatures drop into the 60's, compromising the immune system. Heat stroke will occur if temperatures reach the 90's.
- Furniture:** A wooden or plastic exercise wheel can be provided, but wire rodent wheels are dangerous. Always provide a hiding spot.
- Water:** Start by providing a bowl, although most can be trained to drink from a sipper bottle if it is hung above the bowl at first. Keep water dishes/bottles clean daily. Warm water in a shallow dish can be provided for swimming. Hedgehogs should be bathed occasionally.

Nutrition: Nutrition is paramount for good health. Wild hedgehogs eat a variety of insects, worms,



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snails, slugs, small mammals and small amounts of fruit. In captivity, several excellent prepared diets are available commercially (see below). Low fat or “light” formula cat foods work as well. Hedgehogs will eat a variety of insects, some fruits, eggs, cottage cheese, pinky mice, and baby food. Avoid insect-only diets; they are too low in calcium.

Supplements: Supplements are generally not required for hedgehogs on commercially prepared diets. However, reptile calcium supplements such as *Rep-Cal*, and multivitamins like *Herptivite* (*Rep-Cal Research Labs, Los Gatos, CA*) are good choices if the diet is formulated at home.

Health: Hedgehogs are susceptible to a variety of disease conditions. Skin diseases such as ringworm, mange, and nutritional dermatosis are common. Dental diseases are not uncommon, and regular dental cleaning is recommended. Infectious diseases involving the respiratory and digestive tracts also occur. Internal parasites can be identified with a routine fecal examination. Watch for excessive sneezing, scratching, quill loss, flaky skin, tattered ears, loose stools, or changes in appetite or activity. Hedgehogs are somewhat clumsy, and trauma to the feet and legs will occur. Toenails will need to be clipped occasionally, and may require anesthesia. Unfortunately, cancer is one of the leading causes of death in hedgehogs.

Commercially available diets:

- 1) Hedgehog Diet. Pretty Pets, International, Inc., Stacy, MN. (800) 356-5020.
- 2) Insectivore Diet. Reliable Protein Products, Palm Desert, CA. (760) 321-7533.
- 3) L’Avian Plus Super Premium Hedgehog Food. L’Avian Pet Products, Stephen, MN. (800) 543-3308.
- 4) Mazuri Insectivore Diet. Purina Mills, St. Louis, MO (314) 768-4592.
- 5) ZuPreem Insectivore Diet. Premium Nutritional Products, Mission, KS (800) 345-4767.