

Hedgehog

Are you considering a hedgehog as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Hedgehogs are very high-maintenance pets, and Hedgehogs can live up to 10 years and require specialized care. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$500-700 each year for a single, healthy hedgehog. Hedgehogs are not truly domesticated animals, are prone to biting, and extreme fearfulness and generally dislike human interactions. This should be the first consideration for potential owners. Follow these guidelines for basic hedgehog husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



Basic Care

Housing

The minimum recommended cage size is 36" Lx24" Wx18" H, but larger is definitely better, providing room for exploration, foraging, hiding, and possibly climbing. Cage bottoms should be solid rather than wire to prevent foot ulcers, and a soft material should be used for bedding. Low levels can be provided with shallow ramps or ladders. A dark hide-box is essential for sleeping during the day. To keep your hedgehog engaged and happy, provide environmental enrichments, such as tunnels, cardboard boxes (free of staples) with entry and exit holes, brown paper bags, and wheels or saucers. Hedgehogs are very sensitive to temperature changes and should only be housed in areas between 21 and 27 degrees Celsius. The cage should not be kept in drafts or near radiators or other heat sources. If the area is cool, a low-heat under-cage heater can be placed in one corner allowing the hedgehog to use it if desired but also to move away from the heat if too warm. Because hedgehogs have extremely sensitive hearing, they should be kept in the quietest room possible, with no television or other noises present.

Companionship

Hedgehogs can be kept in pairs, but bonding can be extremely difficult, and many hedgehogs will fight and do serious injury to one another. Adopting a bonded pair is the best possible method of owning a pair, and anyone wishing to bond two unfamiliar hedgehogs should do extensive research and speak to a veterinary specialist before attempting to do so.

Food & Water

Hedgehogs are insectivores and require a specially formulated diet to ensure good health and long life. A healthy diet in a home consists of:

- Pellets: a shallow, heavy dish of good quality, specially formulated hedgehog diet can be free-fed (4tbsp per day should suffice) except with obese hedgehogs at the instruction of your veterinarian. Pellets should contain at least 20% protein and between 5-15% fat.
- Insects: mealworms, crickets and earthworms can be provided in limited quantities (up to 5 mealworms per day or equivalent other insects), and should be used as treats rather than a diet mainstay. Well-cooked pieces of meat in very small quantities can also be offered on occasion as treats.
- Fruits and Vegetables: Small amount of fruits and vegetables can be fed on occasion as treats.
- Toxic foods: Most household plants are toxic to hedgehogs. Avoid people food, like dairy and commercial treats, as they can upset their sensitive digestive systems.

Water: Use a heavy, shallow bowl and provide unlimited fresh water daily.

* All food should be fed at room temperature only. 2 feedings a day, in the morning or upon waking, and after exercise time, about an hour before bed.

Bedding & Litter

Hedgehogs like to burrow and snuggle up, so a soft, fluffy material should be used for bedding, such as Carefresh-type fluffy bedding or soft fleece blankets. Hedgehogs are extremely sensitive to unclean enclosures and their bedding should be completely replaced every other day with fresh, clean bedding. Only use gentle soaps, like dish soap, to clean the cage, and ensure that it is rinsed well and dried fully before use.

Grooming

Hedgehogs do not like water. Do not bathe your hedgehog unless advised to do so by your veterinarian for medical reasons.

House-proofing

Hedgehogs are chewers, especially of paper materials, and should always be supervised when out of the cage for their own safety. Use an exercise enclosure to limit the play area, or supervise carefully in a closed room. Hedgehogs are excellent climbers, so watch carefully to ensure your hedgehog remains safe, even in an enclosure. Hedgehogs can get into very small spaces and are prone to injury if stepped on. They should always be supervised closely when playing outside the cage.

Health Care

Veterinary Care

Veterinary costs can be more expensive than that of cats and dogs because hedgehogs are considered an exotic species and must be treated by a qualified exotic pet veterinarian. While hedgehogs do not require vaccinations, they should see the vet yearly for a check-up or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to

Adopting: Find a hedgehog-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their prices for check-ups and other common procedures.

Common Medical Concerns

Since hedgehogs are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. Common symptoms include but are not limited to: respiratory issues, lack of appetite, over-consumption of water, over-frequent urination, infrequent stools, obesity, change in coat, head tilt, and lumps. Hedgehogs are especially prone to severe disabilities from inactivity due to small cages and lack of exercise time. They are also prone to illness resulting from poor diet and malnutrition. Proper husbandry and care are essential to avoiding most hedgehog illnesses.

Hedgehog Behaviour

Psychology

Hedgehogs are not truly domesticated animals the way cats, dogs and hamsters are. Most hedgehogs will never be comfortable being handled or touched, and hedgehogs are not appropriate pets for homes with children. They are prone to biting and will roll into a ball when nervous, exposing very sharp spikes. When moving them is necessary, gently cupping them in gloved hands or using a spatula to scoop and lift them, may be necessary. They should not be handled frequently if uncomfortable, as this will provoke more severe fearfulness. As prey species, hedgehogs are naturally fearful of loud noises and sudden movements. They should always be kept in as quiet a room as possible. Loud squeaking or whistling noises from other animals, children, televisions, or even a “clucking” sound some people use to get animals’ attention, are extremely frightening to hedgehogs’ sensitive ears, and can provoke a “shock reaction.” Hedgehogs should never have interactions with other animals, especially predator species such as cats, dogs, and ferrets, and should not be kept in homes with birds, young children, or barking dogs.

Bonding with your Hedgehog

Be gentle when interacting with your pet hedgehog and never force interactions: once you gain their trust, they may allow some interactions. Respect their boundaries: some hedgehogs will eventually seek interactions with human companions, but most will not. Hedgehogs are nocturnal, so they are most active in the evenings. They should be provided with a quiet, dark area for sleeping during the day and allowed to wake on their own before attempting interactions. Offering treats, such as mealworms, from the hands is a good way to win their trust. This will take time, so be patient and try to make them as comfortable as possible at all times.

Handling

Hedgehogs generally dislike handling, and many will bite to avoid being picked up. Hedgehogs bite hard and latch on, which can be extremely painful. Despite this, you should never shake a biting hedgehog or throw them off you, as this can cause serious injury to the animal. Never physically or verbally discipline a hedgehog for biting. They are wild animals you have chosen to keep in your home and should be treated with respect for their natural behaviours. Handling should never be forced on a hedgehog, but

occasional handling for transportation to the vet or other reasons may be necessary. In this case, an untame hedgehog should be gently and carefully lifted with gloved hands or a spatula-type object and deposited into a carrier box for transportation. Hedgehogs who do eventually get used to handling should be gently lifted by scooping cupped hands together, and should be allowed to climb onto hands if possible.

Anointing

One behaviour that is seen in hedgehogs which may be puzzling when first seen is called 'self-anointing'. This is when a hedgehog will produce foam from their mouth, then reach their head back and vigorously lick their spines to deposit the foam onto themselves. While the behaviour is poorly understood, we know that it usually occurs in response to new or strong scents/odours in the environment. It may also be sexual behaviour. Self-anointing is a normal behaviour and nothing to be concerned about.

Origins

Hedgehogs are native to Europe and Africa. It is the African Pygmy Hedgehog which is currently kept as a pet in homes. Hedgehogs have only been available as "pets" for a relatively short time and are still basically undomesticated in their behaviour.

Understanding Hedgehog Vocalizations

- Puffing and Sniffing: Disturbed or annoyed
- Exploratory Sniffing: Less sharp than above, helps them navigate
- Short Coughs: Warning to rivals, especially around food.
- Chirping and Squeaking: Excitement, usually only in young hedgehogs.
- Soft whistling and spluttering: Contentment, only exhibited by tame hedgehogs, often when given food or playtime.
- Snoring: Sounds during sleep are normal.
- Loud Screaming: Extreme distress or pain. Examine them and remove any stressors. If you suspect injury or pain, take them to a vet immediately.