



Tips for you and your hedgehog

Hedgehogs are friendly, inquisitive animals who can make very good pets for adults and children. They are small, easily maintained and very tractable. Requiring little space, they are enjoying increasing popularity in a society where people want to have pets, but are often limited by space, time and resources.

This outline is a basic guide to hedgehog care and should by no means replace the advice of a North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian who specializes in this area.

General: Hedgehogs are small, nocturnal, spiny coated mammals. They range from the British Isles, across Europe and into Africa and Asia. The two varieties that are popular as pets are the European and the smaller African. Hedgehogs are protected by law in Europe and in the United States. Local regulations controlling the importation and sale of hedgehogs varies and should be investigated. The African hedgehog is the more suitable of the two for a pet.

Handling: Hedgehogs are friendly, inquisitive animals who can make very good pets for adults and children. They are small, easily maintained and very tractable. Requiring little space, they are enjoying increasing popularity in a society where people want to have pets, but are often limited by space, time and resources. Unlike their cousins, the porcupine, the spines of the hedgehog are not barbed. Handling can be painful, though, and wearing light leather gloves is recommended. Hedgehogs generally adapt well to captivity, and when handled on a regular basis are relaxed and curious. A fearful or threatened hedgehog will curl into a tight ball by means of a powerful muscle which allows the skin to be pulled around the animal similar to a purse string. Some hedgehogs refuse to unroll and should never be forced open. Several ways to persuade them to unroll have been tried successfully, including holding the hedgehog with its head down over a flat surface. It then usually unrolls slowly and tries to reach for the surface. Another method is to heavily stroke the spines, over the rump, backward. It is important to avoid loud or sharp noises when trying to get a hedgehog to relax and unroll.

Housing: A wide variety of caging can be used successfully for hedgehogs. In general, the walls and floor of the enclosure should be smooth. Wire bottoms should be avoided because toes and limbs may catch in the wire and become traumatized or fractured. The height of the enclosure is not critical, but it should be tall enough to prevent the animal from climbing out and low enough to provide good air circulation. Hedgehogs can be housed either singly, as they exist in the wild, or in groups, though fighting may occur among both sexes. Pregnant females should be separated from others before parturition, as cannibalism may occur.

Hedgehogs are extremely susceptible to dermatitis from urine or fecal contamination. To prevent this, bedding should be a soft, absorbent substance, such as wood shavings or shredded newspaper, and should be changed or cleaned daily. Cedar shavings should be avoided because its aromatic properties can cause respiratory distress and liver disease. Cloth and towels should not be used for bedding to prevent string ingestion. Cage furnishings, such as plants, logs, plastic piping, etc., are generally well tolerated and provide needed hiding areas. A nesting box that is slightly larger than the hedgehog should be provided at all times.

Light and Temperature: Hedgehogs are nocturnal, which means they are active at night and sleep during the day. If possible, it is best to maintain hedgehogs on a reverse day/night light cycle. Twelve hours of light and twelve hours of dark are recommended. Optimum ambient temperature should be kept between 75 to 85 degrees. If temperatures fall below that, hedgehogs become less active and are more susceptible to disease. If the ambient temperature falls below 65 degrees a hedgehog may go into hibernation. Hedgehogs do hibernate in the wild, but in captivity will stay active year round if kept warm and fed. Hibernation in captivity is not recommended.

Diet: Hedgehogs are classified as Insectivores, but must have a variety of foods to maintain proper nutritional levels. Hedgehogs have been successfully maintained on a diet of dry, commercial cat or dog chow, a small amount of diced fruits and vegetables, and insects such as crickets and mealworms. Diets should provide adequate protein and be balanced for calcium and phosphorous. Hedgehogs, which are maintained solely on insects may not obtain adequate calcium and risk metabolic bone disease. Other foods that can be offered include hard-boiled-eggs, evaporated milk, and vegetable or beef baby food. Liquid milk and bread should be avoided as this can cause digestive upset. A dish of fresh water must be provided daily. Much information about the habits and physiology of the hedgehog is unknown. Therefore, if questions arise or problems occur, always consult with your veterinarian.

Sexing: Male hedgehogs are larger than females, and have a large percentage of elongated white spines which are rare or absent in females. In males, the penis is external and located midway up the abdomen. The testicles, however, are normally raised within the abdominal cavity.

Medical Considerations:

- **Bacterial/Viral:** Respiratory diseases caused by a variety of bacteria and viruses are known to occur and need to be treated according to laboratory diagnosis (trimethoprim-sulfa 30mg/kg BID or enrofloxacin 2.5 - 5 mg/kg BID). Salmonella infection can manifest in various forms. Myco-bacterium species: granulomas or lymphadenitis.
- **Mycotic:** Ringworm (Dermatomycoses) are not uncommon in hedgehogs and have zoonotic potential.
- **Parasites:**
 - **External-** fleas, mites and ticks have been diagnosed and are treated accordingly.

- **Internal-** lungworms are an important parasite in hedgehogs and frequently cause bronchopneumonia and death.
- **Other** parasites cause debilitation and illness and are diagnosed and treated according to standard treatment regimens.
- **Other:** Neoplasia, dental disease, nutritional diseases and trauma as well as other conditions seen in pet animals must always be considered and need to be approached in accordance with the best known veterinary standards.

Biological Data

| | European | African |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Body weight | 400-1200 g | 250-600 g |
| Average life span in captivity | up to 10 years | up to 10 years |
| Breeding season | spring and early fall | year round |
| Gestation | 34-37 days | 34-37 days |
| Eyes open in young | 13-16 days | 13-16 days |
| Litter size | 1-7 pups | 1-7 pups |
| Normal body temperature | 95 | 95 |
| Keenest senses | hearing and smelling | hearing and smelling |

Hedgehogs, like dogs and cats, benefit from an annual examination by your North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian.

From Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine