African Pygmy Hedgehog

(Atelerix albiventris)

Diet: Insectivorous, Adult Size: 6-10 inches 18-30 ounces
Lifespan: 8-10 years Native To: Central African Savanna.
Characteristics: Active, vocal, solitary and nocturnal.

Did You Know???

- Hedgehogs are one of the oldest groups of mammals, tracing their lineage back millions of years.
- Their spiny armor has a great deal to do with their survival and success. When threatened, hedgehogs curl up into a spiny ball, making them very unappetizing to would-be predators. Hedgehogs have a unique circular skin muscle (*orbicularis panniculi*) that forms a protective "bag" for the animal when contracted and causes its sharp spines to become erect.
- At birth, the hedgehog's spines are beneath a skin membrane, but they begin to emerge within the first 24 hours of life. The spines themselves are hollow hairs made stiff with the protein keratin.

Look Out For This:

Hedgehogs will hibernate in nature when the temperature drops, but it's unhealthy, and often even fatal, if they do this in captivity. To avoid hibernation, the temperature in a hedgehog's environment must be kept above 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Signs that a hedgehog is too cold and on the verge of hibernation are staggered "drunk-like" walking and appetite loss. If a hedgehog exhibits these symptoms, warm its surroundings gradually, and consult a veterinarian.

8 Things You Should Know About African Pygmy Hedgehogs

The Basics -- African Pygmy Hedgehogs are one of 15 different species of hedgehogs, and they represent the overwhelming majority of hedgehogs available in the retail pet trade. They are curious, active and vocal animals that can be fascinating to observe. However, being nocturnal, they will be more active at night and reclusive during the day.

Although some hedgehogs will readily accept humans, others will be suspicious at first. Winning their trust will take patience and kindness. A hedgehog will get to know its human companion primarily thorough its sense of smell, which is sensitive enough to detect a prey animal two inches below the ground.

The hedgehog's lifespan rarely exceeds three years in nature, but it can be more than three times as long in captivity with proper care. Hedgehogs will express themselves by making grunts, chirps and hisses.

Enclosure: Allow Room To Play -- Hedgehogs are energetic and surprisingly athletic animals. Despite the fact that they spend much of their time on the ground, they are agile and effective climbers. So, their enclosures should provide ample room for exercise.

Given the hedgehog’s climbing ability, its enclosure must have a secure escape-proof top. A plastic or metal "ferret enclosure" works well for hedgehogs. This enclosure should measure at least 30 square inches, provide ample ventilation and be escape-proof. If an open-top enclosure is used, it must have slippery sides that are at least 18 inches higher than the top of the tallest accessory or climbing branch to prevent escapes. A 30-gallon aquarium can also be used to house hedgehogs, provided it has a secure mesh top to ensure adequate ventilation.

The enclosure should be placed in a quiet, warm area of the home, away from drafts. Never place a hedgehog's enclosure in direct sunlight.

Hiding Places: They Need A Place To Hide -- Being nocturnal animals, Hedgehogs must have ready access to snug and secure hiding places to sleep in during the day, and to find reassurance whenever they become frightened. A variety of hide boxes, "caves" and overturned logs can be used in their enclosure. It is advisable to have more than one hiding place in an enclosure.

Playthings: Toys and Exercise Wheels are Always Appreciated -- Hedgehogs like to amuse themselves, so toys and exercise wheels should be included in their enclosures. Tennis balls and hard plastic balls are good toy choices.

Toys that can easily be chewed up into little pieces and ingested should be avoided. Also avoid exercise wheels with bars, since hedgehogs can become injured if their feet fall through the open spaces. Solid wheels and mesh wheels with liners are better choices.

Bedding: A Variety Will Work -- Wood shavings that don’t produce a lot of dust, like Aspen, make good bedding for hedgehogs. Hay and pelleted paper cat/bird litter also work. Cedar bedding must be avoided under all circumstances, since it can cause severe harm to a hedgehog’s respiratory system. Place two inches of bedding throughout the enclosure.

Temperature: Moderately Warm -- Hedgehogs do well when the temperature in their environment ranges from the low to upper 70 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature of their surroundings must always be kept above 65 degrees Fahrenheit to avoid the risk of hibernation.

A hedgehog should not have an external heat source placed over its enclosure. Control the enclosure's temperature by controlling overall room temperature.

Diet: They Are Hearty Insect Eaters -- Unlike rabbits, guinea pigs and many small rodents, which live on a vegetarian diet, hedgehogs are largely carnivorous. In nature, their diet consists primarily of insects, although they will also take snakes.

A pet hedgehog should be fed a diet that is rich in protein, but relatively low in fat. Commercially formulated hedgehog foods are the preferred choice, but if they aren't available, ferret food and premium dry low fat cat food can also be used. However, lower-priced kitten/cat food with its lower protein must be avoided.

Some studies suggest that hedgehogs need no more than 100 calories a day. Hedgehogs can be offered an appropriate amount of hedgehog pellets or high protein low fat cat food on a free feeding basis unless they are overweight, in which case food intake should be restricted following common sense guidelines. A teaspoon of chopped vegetables can be offered daily.

Treats should be given on a limited basis. Foods with a high fat content should be avoided or severely restricted to reduce the risk of fatty liver disease.

A healthy hedgehog will be rounded and a little plump. However, an overweight animal will have deposits at the armpits, and experience difficulty rolling into a ball. Some hedgehogs seem to be prone to obesity, and should be monitored carefully. The first sign of obesity is the inability to roll completely up in a ball.

Since hedgehogs are nocturnal, they are more likely to eat at night. The food bowl should be relatively wide (3-6 inches) to minimize spillage, and no more than 3-inches deep.

Water: Use Bottles Instead Of Bowls -- Clean, fresh water should always be available to a hedgehog. New hedgehogs should be given water from a bowl, but most will eventually learn to drink from a bottle. Offering hedgehogs water from a bottle is preferable, because it's more sanitary - hedgehogs tend to fling pieces of substrate into water bowls, plus bottles cannot be tipped over.

A hamster-style water bottle should be introduced to a hedgehog's enclosure while the animal is still drinking from a bowl. Gradually, most hedgehogs will learn to accept the bottle.

The keeper should make sure that the hedgehog is accepting water from the bottle before removing the bowl. Some hedgehogs will never drink from a bottle, in which case a bowl will suffice. Bottled, chlorine-free water is better for hedgehogs than tap water.

How To Handle A Hedgehog

Most hedgehogs, even those that are initially wary and shy, will come to accept handling gladly. The first step in winning a hedgehog's trust is to get the animal familiar with you. Do this by sitting by the animal's cage talking in a soft voice and offering a treat. A hedgehog will get to know you by your scent. For this reason, gloves and heavy perfumes/colognes should not be worn when picking up a hedgehog, since they will make your scent less recognizable.

Before even opening the cage, make sure the room is hedgehog-safe and doesn't provide an easy chance to escape. Curious cats and dogs should be elsewhere in the house, electrical cords must be picked up off the floor, and if possible the doors to the room should be closed. Do not handle a hedgehog over a hard surface, and if possible hold the animal close to the ground.

When picking up a hedgehog, gently place one hand on each side of the animal. Then cup your hands together to form a restful place for the hedgehog. Avoid making sudden movements when approaching or lifting the animal.

Do not grasp a hedgehog from the top, since this will scare the animal and cause it to extend its sharp spines. You should also never grab a hedgehog by the neck or tail, since this can cause serious, even life-threatening injuries.

Many hedgehogs will enjoy sitting on the lap of a trusted human companion. Always wash your hands after playing with or handling a hedgehog.

Hedgehogs Around The House

Once hedgehogs have accepted their handlers, they will enjoy being taken out of their enclosures to roam around a secure area of the home under human supervision. Hedgehogs should not be placed in a room with a cat or dog, since they can be regarded as a prey animal. Small children should be carefully supervised when playing with a hedgehog. Make sure a room is "hedgehog safe," with no household cleaners; toxic plants or other potential poisons accessible, and no small crevices or openings that the hedgehog can wedge into and become stuck. Electrical cords should also be out of reach to the hedgehog. The areas below and behind heavy furniture should be blocked so this quick and agile small animal cannot enter those areas.

Self-Anointing

When some hedgehogs, especially males, become aroused by an unfamiliar or provocative scent, they will tug at its source before pulling away, suddenly contorting themselves and foaming at the mouth. The hedgehog will then go into a frenzy, spreading the saliva all over its spines.

Although it looks alarming, this "self anointing" behavior is quite normal. Most naturalists believe that hedgehogs do this as a form of protection. Hedgehogs are very resistant to toxins, so they are able to take in relatively large quantities of toxic substances without

harming themselves. However, by using their saliva to spread a potentially toxic substance over their spines, they manage to add an extra deterrent to their already formidable self-defense system. Many people are allergic or sensitive to the substance on the prickly quills. If you find that you are sensitive and react to the quills, you should use gloves or allow other people in the family to handle the hedghog.

Quilling In Juveniles

Just like people lose their baby teeth, hedgehogs shed their "baby spines." At about 2-3 months, the hedgehog's baby spines will fall out as their adult counterparts emerge from beneath the skin. This "quilling" is completely normal, although a pet might act a little temperamental when it's taking place. During quilling, a hedgehog's skin should be checked for mites or fleas. If any are spotted, a veterinarian should be contacted.

Cleaning The Enclosure

Hedgehogs are relatively clean, odor-free animals, so keeping their enclosures neat should present no special challenges. Their enclosures should be inspected daily, and any uneaten food, debris, feces, and wet or soiled substrate should be removed. Toys should also be inspected daily and cleaned when necessary.

The food dish and water bowl or bottle should be removed from the enclosure, rinsed off and refilled on a daily basis. If the hedgehog uses a litter pan, it should be inspected every day. Fecal matter should be scooped up and removed, and the litter should be changed completely every 2-3 days.

Every week the entire enclosure should be emptied, and the hedgehog placed in a temporary holding area. Substrate should be replaced, and the entire enclosure, as well as its accessories, should be washed with warm soapy water. Rinse and dry the enclosure and its contents thoroughly, making sure all traces of soap are gone before adding two inches of new substrate and reintroducing the hedgehog. Periodically disinfect the cage with a product designed for small animals or a bleach solution, following the guidelines found earlier in this manual.

Hedgehogs should be placed in a secure "holding" cage or tank while their cage is cleaned. Always wear rubber gloves when cleaning a hedgehog's cage, and wash your hands afterward.

BRIGHT IDEA: *PUT A LITTER TRAY IN A HEDGEHOG'S ENCLOSURE*. Hedgehogs are naturally clean animals, and many of them will learn to use a litter box. Place a small litter tray in a corner of the enclosure and fill it with dust free cat litter. (Clumping litter should not be used since it can stick to a wet hedgehog.) When droppings are found in the enclosure, place them in the litter tray – eventually most hedgehogs will get the idea.

Hedgehog Health Care

Overall, hedgehogs are healthy and hearty little animals that can live relatively long, active lives when given the proper care. Before acquiring a hedgehog, the keeper should have contact information for a veterinarian with experience in small animal care. A growing number of veterinary practices have developed small animal specialties, so finding a qualified professional nearby should be relatively easy for most customers.

Like many small animals, hedgehogs are good at masking symptoms. In many cases, they will not show signs of an illness until it has progressed to a serious level. Some of the most common general indications that a hedgehog is not doing well include:

- ***Sudden behavioral changes*** --- A friendly animal all of a sudden becomes temperamental, or a feisty pet becomes suddenly passive.
- ***Loss of appetite*** – A hedgehog suddenly eats less, or hasn't taken food in 1-2 days. (If a hedgehog drinks no water for 24 hours, a veterinarian should be consulted immediately.)
- ***Unresponsive and cold to the touch*** – This is a sign that the hedgehog is in a pre-hibernation state. Try warming the animal by filling a water bottle with very warm water and wrapping it with a towel, or wrapping it in a warmed cloth. If this doesn't help within 30-60 minutes, call a vet.
- ***Runny nose, discharge from eyes*** –This can be a sign of a respiratory infection, and needs to be seen by a veterinarian.
- ***Discolored feces*** – Green feces in particular can be the sign of an intestinal infection. Bring a fecal sample and the hedgehog to the veterinarian.
- ***Stiff, uncertain walking –*** This can be the sign of Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome or some other serious disease. A veterinarian should be consulted promptly.
- ***Dry Flaky Skin –*** Along with the loss of quills in an adult hedgehog, this can indicate a fungal infection or mite infestation. Veterinary treatment is needed.

Hedgehog Ailments

- ***Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome*** –This is a disease that involves the gradual loss of muscle control. At first, the hedgehog wobbles around like it is drunk. Over time, it becomes increasingly more difficult for the hedgehog to walk or stand. Eventually, the hedgehog loses control over all muscles, including the heart. An experienced veterinarian can recommend a program of diet and exercise that can slow the progression of the disease to varying degrees, but as of this time there is no known cure.
- ***Mite Infestation*** – Hedgehogs can become infested with mites. Symptoms include loss of quills, and crusty buildups around the eyes, ears and base of quills. This ailment can be addressed effectively by a veterinarian with medications, and although it's uncomfortable, it's not fatal.
- ***Fleas and Ticks*** – Like dogs, cats and many other mammals, hedgehogs can become infested with fleas and ticks. The treatment, involving sprays and baths, is best administered by a veterinarian.

Recommended Hedgehog Supplies:

- A secure enclosure
- Hiding areas (at least two)
- Toys such as hard plastic balls or tennis balls
- An exercise wheel
- A water bottle
- A suitable substrate
- Food bowl
- A variety of foods
- Litter and small litter pan
- Gloves
- A secure transport cage for use to go to the vet and during cage cleaning