



Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia

African pygmy hedgehog ***Atelerix albiventris***

You got a new hedgehog? Congratulations!

Please refer to this handout in helping you setting your new hedgie up for success as most of the diseases and emergency presentations to the veterinary hospital stem from improper husbandry and could be avoided.

Did you know?

- Hedgehogs are insectivorous mammal- this means that they eat insects
- The African pygmy hedgehog originates from across central Africa
- Captive African hedgehogs weigh between 250 to 600 grams
- Their lifespan in captivity may be up to 10 years (average is closer to 5 to 7 years)
- They are nocturnal- which means that they spend much of the daytime sleeping. They awaken at dusk to forage.
- Natural diet consists primarily of insects, snails, slugs, and worms, with occasional small vertebrates, fruit, and fungus.
- Hedgehogs are excellent diggers, and can climb and swim well.
- Sexing hedgehogs is relatively easy.
 - Males possess a midabdominal ventral prepuce, with intra-abdominal testes that are difficult to palpate.
 - Female hedgehogs possess a vulva that is comparatively close to the rectal opening, and between two to five pairs of mammae



Behavior and natural history:

- The defensive behavior of hedgehogs is limited to rolling into a tight ball of erect spines. This may be accompanied by hissing, spitting sounds, or grunting, although they rarely bite.
- Hedgehogs also exhibit an unusual behavior of self-anointing also called “anting.”
 - Certain substances will elicit this behavior.
 - The hedgehog produces mouthfuls of frothy saliva, which it will then spread and spatter over its spines and skin.
 - The behavior may last for minutes or an hour or more, and they may appear frenzied.
 - Hedgehogs may display this behavior upon meeting another animal or upon contact with certain substances, and the reason for this behavior is unknown.
- Hedgehogs may be housed either alone or in groups; however, groups should contain no more than one adult male.

Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia
info@eahphilly.vet

E.A. Simone-Freilicher, H.L. Hofer / Vet Clin Exot Anim 7 (2004) 257–267

- Because fighting can occur between both sexes, group-housed hedgehogs should be monitored for compatibility, and separated if signs of aggression are seen.

Enclosure:

- Hedgehogs are excellent climbers, and require enclosures with smooth walls that are tall enough to prevent climbing out when standing on its hind limbs.
- Ideally they should have an enclosed area at least 3ft X 2ft.
- Cages should not have wire flooring due to the risk of toe and limb injury.
- A hiding spot can be provided to decrease stress, and may be a hollowed log, cardboard, or wooden box, plastic flower pot, or a plastic pipe.
- Bedding should be soft and absorbent; currently marketed products such as recycled newspaper bedding may be ideal (Carefresh, International Absorbents, Inc, Bellingham, Washington).
 - **Avoid** using wood shavings, especially the aromatic kind since they can affect the respiratory system and cause long term damage. (less aromatic woods such as pine or aspen should be chosen if no choice)
 - Change the substrate frequently, as hedgehogs are very susceptible to dermatitis (skin infections and irritation) due to fecal or urine accumulation.
- Hedgehogs should be allowed out of their cages daily for exercise, preferably in the evening when they are naturally more active.

Environment:

- Hedgehogs should be kept at temperatures between 75 to 85F.
- Temperatures higher than this increase the risk of heat stroke, while temperatures less than 60F tend to induce a hibernation-like state called torpor.
 - Torpor is associated with a decrease in metabolism and a decreased resistance to infection, and is not recommended in pet hedgehogs

Nutrition:

- Hedgehogs have 36 teeth
 - The two upper central incisors are spaced wide apart
- The wild diet consists mostly of insects, but can include small vertebrates such as snakes, lizards, bird eggs, chicks, small rodents, snails, slugs, crabs, fruit, and fungi.
- An appropriate captive diet consists of Mazuri Insectivore Diet, dry commercial hedgehog kibble, supplemented with dubia roaches, crickets, waxworms, small amounts of diced fruit and vegetables, hard-boiled eggs, cottage cheese, and occasional small mice.
- An insect-only diet should be avoided, as it may contribute to nutritional (calcium/ phosphorous) imbalance and metabolic bone disease.
- Dry food may be more helpful in preventing dental disease than moist or canned food.
 - If moist foods are offered, they should be given in the evening when the hedgehog's natural nocturnal foraging behavior will ensure that moist food will be eaten quickly.
- Pet hedgehogs are prone to obesity, so you will need to monitor food intake and encourage daily exercise.
 - Light or low-fat feline dry food can be given if the hedgehog displays a tendency toward obesity.

- **AVOID** Nuts and grains, as they may wedge in the mouth, as well as milk, which may cause severe diarrhea.
- Many hedgehogs can learn to drink from a water bottle, and this is recommended for improved hygiene. Some individuals may have difficulty learning to recognize and drink from a water bottle, so please continue to provide a water bowl until certain the hedgehog is using the water bottle

Signs of illness

- Hedgehogs are susceptible to external parasites such as mites, fleas, and ticks.
 - Bacterial and fungal dermatitis (skin infection/irritation) is common.
- Microscopic examination of any ear discharge is recommended, as hedgehogs are susceptible to ear mites as well as bacterial ear infections.
- Hedgehogs are also susceptible to internal parasites and intestinal bacteria such as salmonella.
- Skin nodules and masses should be tested (aspirated or biopsied), as abscesses, granulomas, neoplasias (cancers), and papillomas all occur in hedgehogs.
- Trauma due to accidents or inappropriate equipment (such as rodent exercise wheels) can lead to muscle and bone injury.
- A fatal neurological (demyelinating) disease has also been reported in African hedgehogs in the United States. This disease results in ataxia (wobbly walk) and hind limb paralysis, and the cause and effective treatment have yet to be discovered.
- Kidney disease appears commonly in older hedgehogs, and bacterial pneumonias (lung infection) may occur in hedgehogs of any age.
- Cancer is probably the most common disease, and has been reported in hedgehogs as young as 2 to 3 years old.
- Hedgehogs can carry diseases that may be transmitted to humans (zoonotic).
 - These include salmonellosis, dermatophytosis (ringworm), leptospirosis, and mycobacteriosis, cryptosporidia, capillaria, fleas, and ticks.
 - As with any animal, proper hygiene should be observed during and after handling, and immunocompromised people should consider protective gear if they choose to handle these animals.

Reasons to bring your hedgehog to a veterinarian:

Difficulty or abnormal breathing sound and pattern

Lethargy and exercise intolerance

Itchiness/flaky skin/quill loss/head shaking

Masses/lumps

Changes in fecal production and fecal consistency

Drooling

Traumatic injuries

Loss of balance

Increase in urination/drinking

Inappetance/weight loss or weight gain

