



# Care of Hedgehogs (*Atelerix albiventris*)



## Ness Exotic Wellness Center

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Hedgehogs are nocturnal insectivorous mammals belonging to the family *Erinaceidae*. Two species of hedgehogs are kept as pets, the European hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) and the African Pygmy hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*). The African Pygmy hedgehog is the species kept in the United States. The European hedgehog can grow to twelve inches in length and nearly three pounds in weight. In contrast, the African hedgehog only measures six to nine inches in length and about one pound in weight. The normal coloration is white or cream colored ventrum and face, with white and black or brown banded quills.

### **Pet Suitability**

Hedgehogs are not appropriate pets for everyone. These pets are best suited for adults and older children because of the prickly quills that can injure a child. They are solitary and nocturnal animals, which is in contrast to the behavioral characteristics of more traditional pets. The average life span in captivity is four to six years, with potential longevity of nearly ten years of age. There are no restrictions for owning hedgehogs in Illinois; however, they are illegal in certain states like California or Hawaii, and some states require permits to own them. Please check the state and local laws prior to moving if you own a hedgehog.

### **Behavior**

Hedgehogs are nocturnal creatures and will be most active at night. They have a very strong sense of smell and hearing to compensate for their poor vision. They will usually perform a unique behavior called "self-anointing" or "anting" when presented with a new substance or object, where the new substance is mixed in the mouth until frothy saliva forms, which is then applied onto the spines of the body. There is still speculation on the purpose of this behavior, but it is thought to be a way for hedgehogs to familiarize themselves with new scents in their territory. When agitated or distressed,

hedgehogs will puff up and make a hissing or coughing sound. They will also raise their quills and roll into a tight ball as a defensive mechanism. Normal vocalizations include snuffling and grunts.

### **Environment / Husbandry**

Hedgehogs are very active and energetic at night. In the wild, they will travel a territory of 650 to 1000 feet in diameter daily in search of food. A large cage or enclosure should be provided to allow adequate room to run and exercise. The enclosure should have a cover and smooth walls since hedgehogs are excellent climbers. In addition to a large cage, an exercise wheel can be provided for running. A closed wheel without slits is preferred to prevent toes from getting caught and traumatized. Plastic tubes or small boxes can be provided to satisfy the need for privacy and shelter. Most hedgehogs can be trained to use a litter box if provided in an area away from the feeding and sleeping sections.

Hedgehogs enjoy burrowing in deep substrate. Appropriate bedding includes fleece and towels, rabbit food pellets, or paper-based bedding like Care Fresh. Make sure any towels you use do not have any loose threads, as these can become entangled around legs and toes. Avoid wood shavings for bedding, particularly pine or cedar, as they contain aromatic oils that can be irritating to the respiratory tract, and can be sources of mite, tick, or lice infestation. Corn cob bedding is also inappropriate due to being a good medium for bacterial or fungal growth, as well as risk of GI impaction if ingested.

Hedgehogs prefer an ambient temperature between 75°F and 80°F with low humidity. Temperatures that are too low or too high result in lethargy and anorexia, leading to a hibernation-like state, called torpor. This can make them prone to illness and disease. Hedgehogs can be overheated when temperatures are above 90°F.

### **Nutrition**

Although classified as insectivores, hedgehogs accept an omnivorous diet in captivity. The natural diet consists primarily of insects, worms, snails and small mammals. In addition, hedgehogs are known to ingest eggs, fruit, roots, small reptiles, amphibians and small fish. The nutritional requirements of captive hedgehogs have not been fully established. The basis of the recommended captive diet includes high quality dry cat food or commercial dry hedgehog diet. It is important that the diet is low in iron with a relatively high protein level. Fresh insects are an important natural component to the diet. Cooked egg and lean meat, such as poultry or fish, can also be provided at a maximum of one teaspoon daily. A small portion of fruit or vegetables can also be

offered. Obesity is common in hedgehogs; therefore adjust the diet and increase exercise when they appear overweight. Food can be hidden in multiple dishes throughout the enclosure to encourage more activity and foraging behavior.

### Common Diseases

- Obesity: Hedgehogs are easily overfed in captivity and often become obese since they do not need to travel as far to forage for their food. Average body weight for a male is 400-600 g and 300-400 g for a female. Talk with your vet about appropriate diet changes if your hedgehog appears obese.
- Torpor: This is a hibernation-like state that hedgehogs may enter if their environment is too cold or too hot, and can extend for several weeks. Signs include decreased activity, ataxia, burrowing, and decreased appetite. Metabolic function decreases and hedgehogs can become immunosuppressed, so it is not recommended for pet hedgehogs to enter this state. Ideal temperature range is 75 – 85°F. If your hedgehog enters torpor, call a vet to discuss how to safely bring him or her back to correct temperature.
- Mites: Skin mites are a common finding in hedgehogs. Infestation sometimes can be caused by the environment or infected bedding (usually wood shavings). It is also thought that there may be a subclinical infestation in the general population, and clinical signs appear at times of stress or immunosuppression. Signs include dry scaly skin, redness, itchiness, quill loss, greasy discharge, skin crusts, appearance of live mites, and decreased appetite or activity.
- Diarrhea: There can be several causes for diarrhea, including bacterial, viral, or fungal infection, inappropriate diet or food sensitivity, GI parasites, toxicity, or neoplasia. Different diagnostic tests may be needed to help tailor treatment. A common finding is *Salmonella*, which hedgehogs can be asymptomatic carriers for. Always wash your hands very well after handling your hedgehog or its enclosure, regardless if he or she is sick.
- Cancer: Neoplasia is prevalent in hedgehogs, and has been reported in almost every body system. Common cancers include oral squamous cell carcinoma, lymphoma, and mammary gland tumor, though many other types have been reported as well. Depending on the type of tumor, surgery may be an option; however, most neoplasia tends to be malignant with poor prognosis. If your hedgehog develops a mass, it should be taken to a vet to determine if it is a tumor or not.

- Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome: Also known as "demyelinating paralysis", this is a progressive paralysis that occurs in about 10% of hedgehogs in the US. The cause is still unknown. Signs include an ascending paralysis from the hind limbs to the forelimbs, lack of coordination, falling over, tremors, seizures, inability to ball up, muscle atrophy, bulging eyes, and self-mutilation. Treatment is general supportive care with fluids and supplemental feeding; however, prognosis is usually poor.