

Caring for Your Hedgehog

By Mark Burgess, DVM

Hedgehogs are small, shy, insect-eating mammals with quills on top and fur on the face and belly. The quills resemble those of porcupines, but are not barbed and do not imbed in the skin when touched. When frightened, hedgehogs roll into a ball and emit an odd rattling hiss. They may bounce to try to poke you with their quills, but they rarely attempt to bite. They can make decent pets if socialized and they typically live two to four years.



There are many species of hedgehogs, including the large European hedgehog and many African species. The African pygmy hedgehog is the species commonly acquired as pets. It is illegal to have hedgehogs as pets in certain areas of the U.S., so please check your state, city, and county ordinances before getting a hedgehog.

If you do decide to get one, please adopt from a rescue group rather than buying from a pet store or breeder. There are many wonderful hedgehogs out there just waiting to be adopted. To find a hedgehog rescue, do a search for “hedgehog rescue” on the Internet or visit the Hedgehog Welfare Society at www.hedgehogwelfare.org.

Housing

Since African hedgehogs are native to warm regions, they do not tolerate cold temperatures very well. They should be kept above 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

They may be housed in wood or wire cages with solid floors; a minimum cage size is 24 x 24 inches; cage height is not critical. Avoid wire floors, since their feet may become caught and bones broken as the pet tries to free himself. Wire floors also tend to cause sores on the feet. Provide a thick layer of good bedding, such as recycled paper or hardwood shavings (not cedar or pine). Soft, clean towels can be used, but should be removed if your pet chews them or if they become frayed; the hedgehog may become tangled in any loose threads.

Hedgehogs are quiet animals, but they can be very active, especially at night. Ideally, give them daily exercise outside of the cage for at least 30 minutes. Hedgehogs occasionally can be aggressive with each other if housed together, so they may need to be kept separate to prevent fighting, especially with males.

Feeding

The bulk of the hedgehog’s diet should be low-fat hedgehog pellets (not a seed and fruit mix). Pellets may be fed free-choice, unless obesity occurs. Use a formula with no more than 7 percent fat – Pretty Pets is a good brand of food. You can also use a very low-fat cat food, such as Hill’s W/D (7 percent fat). The hedgehog’s natural diet is mostly bee-

bles. In captivity, occasional insects such as crickets or mealworms can be fed, but these are not nutritionally balanced and should be used sparingly. Invertebrates with better nutritional content would include slugs, earthworms, and silkworms.

Fresh water, of course, should always be available. Ball-bearing bottles are cleaner and not as easily spilled as bowls. Remember to clean your hedgehog's cage, food bowls and water sources regularly.

Common Diseases

Obesity. The most common medical problem seen in captive hedgehogs is obesity. The usual cause is feeding high-calorie foods, such as regular cat food, seeds or nuts, or fatty insects such as mealworms and crickets. But hedgehogs can overeat even on a low-fat hedgehog diet, so food intake often must be restricted to maintain proper body weight. Healthy hedgehogs should appear twice as long as they are wide; they are not round in shape, except when rolled up. Obesity increases the risk of tumor development and may shorten your pet's lifespan. Weight loss should be accomplished slowly, since obese pets who lose weight too rapidly may develop liver disease.

Weight loss. Because hedgehogs are aggressive eaters and rarely lose weight unless put on a strict diet, spontaneous weight loss is a cause for concern. It usually indicates significant illness, such as dental disease, cancer, heart disease, or uterine disease. Seek immediate veterinary advice if you notice your pet losing weight for no apparent reason.

Dental diseases. Hedgehogs develop gum disease and tooth infection with age. Signs may include salivation, difficulty eating, and bad breath. Infected teeth may be loose and painful. Treatment is cleaning and/or extraction of the affected teeth, and oral antibiotics. Oral odor and salivation can also be a sign of oral cancer, which is common in older hedgehogs.

Mites. These are common skin parasites, but they often produce no symptoms until the mite population grows large. When numerous, the microscopic mites cause itching, flaking, and quill loss. A hedgehog with a severe case of mites may develop scabs or sores from intense scratching and biting at the skin. Mites respond to treatment with ivermectin (oral or injectable) given weekly for 6-8 weeks. Lyme sulfur dip may help when applied once or twice weekly for 6-8 weeks, but it is more labor-intensive and must be applied thoroughly.

Cleaning the cage weekly when treating the mites may help reduce re-infestation, but long-term environmental treatment is unnecessary, since the parasites die if they are off their host for long. These parasites are species-specific but highly contagious between hedgehogs, so use caution when introducing new pets to an existing group.

Respiratory infection. Signs include sneezing, wheezing, lethargy, nasal or eye discharge, or difficulty breathing. Various bacteria may cause this type of infection. Treatment is with antibiotics. You can minimize your hedgehog's risk of respiratory disease by providing her with a warm, clean cage; avoiding the use of wood-chip beddings; and feeding her a balanced diet.

Head tilt (wry neck, torticollis). This is usually due to internal ear infection, and is sometimes secondary to a respiratory infection. The hedgehog usually tilts his head to one side and loses his balance, often falling or circling when trying to walk. Bacteria are the usual cause and treatment is with antibiotics.

Fight wounds. Hedgehogs can occasionally be aggressive with each other, and sometimes fight if housed together. This may result in bite wounds. Any visible wounds require immediate medical treatment; the risk of infection is great, and early antibiotic therapy to prevent infection is the safest option.

Cancers. Older hedgehogs are highly prone to many types of cancer. Common types include oral tumors, and mammary tumors (breast cancer) in females. Any visible lump should be checked immediately by a veterinarian. Oral odor, drooling, or difficulty eating are also cause for concern. Many tumors are curable if caught early and removed. Weight control may reduce the risk of some tumors. Spaying female hedgehogs most likely reduces the risk of mammary tumors, and eliminates the risk of uterine cancer.

Heart disease (cardiomyopathy). This degenerative disease of the heart is seen in many pet species, including dogs, cats and ferrets, and also in humans. The causes are unknown, but some forms in dogs and cats have been linked to nutritional deficiencies. Signs of heart failure include bloating, lethargy, and difficulty breathing. Treatment may control symptoms for months, but isn't likely to cure the disease. The risk of heart disease might be reduced by feeding a balanced diet and preventing obesity.

Progressive paralysis (degenerative myelopathy). This poorly understood disease of unknown origin causes slow deterioration of the spinal cord. A gradual weakness and paralysis begins in the rear legs and usually progresses to the front legs over time. Total paralysis can result. There is no effective treatment in most cases, and the condition is often fatal.

Hair or thread entanglements. Hedgehogs are prone to becoming entangled in long pieces of thread (from bedding, such as frayed towels) or in strands of their people's hair. The strands wrap around a leg or foot (or occasionally the penis in males) and act like a tourniquet, cutting into the skin and cutting off blood flow. Infection and loss of the foot may result. Minimize exposure to long hairs, strings or threads in the cage environment. If your pet is limping or has a swollen foot, seek immediate veterinary care.

Veterinary Care

No vaccines are given, but regular exams are recommended for early disease detection. Have an exam done when you first get your hedgehog, then at one year old, then every six months after that. With good care, your hedgehog can be a happy and lovable pet!

Dr. Mark Burgess is owner of Southwest Animal Hospital/The Exotic Animal Practice in Beaverton, Oregon. Ninety-five percent of his practice is small exotic pets, including ferrets, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, hedgehogs, marsupials, and some wildlife. He lectures at conferences and has published articles on exotic pet disease in medical journals.