

Introduction to the African Pygmy Hedgehog

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Introduction

Hedgehogs are small mammals that belong to the order Insectivora. There are several species that are found throughout the British Isles, Europe, and Asia and Africa. Hedgehogs are not native to North America. The African pygmy hedgehog



(*Atelerix albiventris*) originated in the African savanna, and is now widely bred in North America for the pet industry. The European hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) is a larger species, native to England and Europe and protected by law in many areas.

The African pygmy hedgehog is small, nocturnal, and spiny-coated. They vary in color from brown to almost black with a white ventrum. The adult ranges in weight from 300-600 grams (1 lb = 450 grams). Life expectancy averages 3-4 years in the wild but up to 10 years in captivity.

Anatomy & Physiology

Hedgehogs are characterized by the short, grooved white and brown spines that cover the upper part of the body. The face and belly are covered with soft, light-colored fur. The hedgehog can assume a defensive posture by rolling up and erecting the spines to resemble a tight ball of sharp spines.

Gender (sex) is easy to identify in hedgehogs. The male has a penis and prepuce located midway along the abdomen. The testes are usually intra-abdominal and are not easily seen. The female has a vulva located close to the rectal opening. African hedgehogs breed year-round. The gestation period is 34-37 days. Litter size ranges from 1-7 with an average of 3-4 pups. The young are born blind with soft white spines. New brown spines appear in 2-3 days and the eyes open in 2-3 weeks. Weaning occurs at 4-6 weeks.

In their native habitat, a hedgehog will dig its burrow under logs, leaves, among rocks, or tree roots and sleep most of the day. They are solitary and nocturnal, emerging at dusk to forage for insects. When undisturbed, it moves with an unsteady, waddling gait but can run quickly. The hedgehog has a keen sense of hearing and smelling, making it an adept hunter and forager. The European species will hibernate in the winter and the African species will aestivate in the hot, dry season. Hibernation is not essential and is not recommended for captive hedgehogs.

Housing & Diet

Hedgehogs are usually caged alone but can be housed in groups if given enough space. Hedgehogs are excellent climbers, so cages should be smooth-walled and high enough to prevent escapes. Wire flooring should be avoided due to the potential for toe and limb injury. Newspaper or wood shavings (pine or aspen) can be used as bedding, but it must be changed frequently. A sleeping area can be made from cardboard boxes, hollowed logs, wooden boxes, or plastic flowerpots and filled with hay or leaves.

The native diet consists of a variety of insects, occasional small vertebrates, and carrion (dead animals). Captive pets can be fed a diet of soaked low-fat dog or cat chow, smaller amounts of mealworms or earthworms, and a small amount of chopped fruit and vegetables. Because of the calcium-phosphorus imbalance, a diet solely of insects must be avoided. Hedgehogs should be fed once daily in the evening. Captive hedgehogs have the tendency to become obese; early evening exercise should be encouraged.

Physical Examination & Restraint

Hedgehogs typically roll-up during clinic visits making a full physical examination impossible without sedation. Light leather gloves are often used to protect against the sharp spines. Some hedgehogs can be scruffed behind the ears if caught before they ball up, however, the majority will need to be sedated. The preferred method of sedation is isoflurane gas. The hedgehog is initially placed in a small plastic box and then switched to a face mask to allow inhalation of the gas. Isoflurane is generally safe for most hedgehogs.

Common Conditions And Diseases

There is very little information in the literature regarding the diseases of pet African pygmy hedgehogs. The following list of conditions represents a review of the literature as well as the author's own clinical experience.

Cancer of almost any body part, but especially the mouth and skin

Dental disease

Heart disease

Kidney failure

Leg and foot injuries

Obesity

Overgrown nails

Quill loss (mites are a common cause)

Respiratory problems

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