

HEDGEHOG WELFARE SOCIETY

www.HedgehogWelfare.org

AFRICAN HEDGEHOG CARE SHEET

This information sheet is designed to give caregivers basic information regarding the care of hedgehogs. For more in-depth information, several web links are provided at the end of this article.

Housing

Careful consideration should be given to the size of accommodations for your new hedgehog. Although they are small animals, they do need a lot of room to move around. When choosing a cage for your hedgie there are several things to keep in mind. It should be the largest you can fit in the space available. We suggest the absolute minimum size to be 18" x 24". Be sure the cage has a solid bottom and is tall enough to accommodate a wheel which is a must for a hedgehog. Quality Cage Company in Portland, Oregon (www.qualitycage.com), makes very nice hedgehog cages. The 30" x 30" size is a very generous choice for your quilly friend. The 24" x 30" is still a good size although less ideal. Almost all hedgehogs are fine with an 11" wheel, although there are 15" wheels available which are better for larger hedgies or for cage mates who like to run side by side because it is wider.

Another alternative to a regular cage is one of the huge sterilite containers or an aquarium. However, these do not allow as much ventilation and should NEVER be used with a top on them.

You can use fabric liners cut to fit your cage bottom. If you sew, a good liner can be made of two layers of corduroy or twill with a layer of fleece in between. Make sure there are no loose threads that could catch on a hedgies nail. Never use terry cloth towels since their nails can get caught in the cloth loops. If you decide you would prefer to use wood shavings, use only Aspen. Do NOT use cedar as it contains carcinogenic phenols that are known to cause respiratory illness and even death in small animals. You can also use a product called Carefresh which resembles ground up gray cardboard and can be found in most pet stores. Careful attention must be paid to a male's genitals if litter or shavings of any kind are used, as it can get stuck to or under their penal shaft.

Water and Food Dishes

Water bowls should be heavy and shallow so your hedgie can get to it and not tip it over. Wash thoroughly every day and replenish with fresh water. If you use a water bottle, it too must be scrubbed frequently, and water should be changed daily to prevent bacteria from building up. There have been some instances where hedgehogs have injured their teeth or tongue using a water bottle. It is important to know that not all hedgehogs know how to use both a bowl and a bottle, so be sure your hedgie knows how to drink from whatever you are providing him/her.

Food dishes follow the same rules-heavy and shallow. Good sources for small dishes include cooking stores for small Pyrex bowls, or oriental grocery stores for small plastic bowls. Don't use pottery or ceramic bowls from an oriental store, since they may contain lead-based paint or glaze.

Accessories

Wheel: This is a MUST for a hedgehog! It will provide hours of entertainment and good exercise for your pet. DO NOT use a wire wheel designed for a rodent. Your hedgies' feet can slip through the rungs and cause serious injury or broken legs. Don't buy anything smaller than an 11" wheel. Excellent wheels can be bought from Carolina Storm Hedgehogs. (<http://www.carolinastormhedgehogs.com/storm-bucket-wheel.html>) or Quality Cage Co. A bucket or cakewalk style wheel are good choices. They're easy to clean, safe, and virtually silent. Many pet stores carry the Silent Spinner (size large) or Comfort Wheel (size giant). They will both work, but there have been some problems reported with using them, especially for large hedgehogs. We recommend the use of bathtub anti-slip stick-ons for the bucket or cakewalk wheels. They will provide much better traction for your hedgegie. It's perfectly normal for a hedgegie to poop and urinate while running in the wheel. Place a litter pan beneath the wheel to catch the run-off and encourage your hedgegie to use the litter pan. Scrub the wheels daily to prevent your hedgegie's feet from getting infected.

Litter Boxes: Many hedgehogs will use them. A flat plastic pan or cookie sheet can be used. You can also use commercially sold litter boxes for small animals. Some bucket wheels will fit inside the "Hi Back" ferret boxes that are sold in most pet stores. As for litter, you can use Carefresh, Yesterday's News (similar to Carefresh), Aspen Supreme (pelletted Aspen), paper towels or puppy pads. DO NOT use clay or clumping cat litter! This can stick to their genitals, and some hedgies have been known to eat it. To "encourage" your hedgegie to use the litter box, when s/he poops, place the droppings in the litter pan so s/he will see where it is supposed to go. Also, if you notice that your hedgehog prefers one corner of the cage, you may wish to move the litter box there. There is a good article about litter training in the March, 2002, newsletter on the HWS website, www.hedgehogwelfare.org.

Toys: Cat balls, ferret treat balls, Beanie Babies, or toilet paper tubes cut in half lengthwise all make good toys for your hedgegie. Hedgies also like things to crawl in. You might want to get some 4" diameter white PVC pipe for your little one. They can be found at any hardware store, come in a variety of shapes, are easy to clean and safe for your pet. (Do not use black as the material they're made from has been reported to be toxic.)

Critter Balls: Many hedgehogs love to run freely around the house in a large plastic critter ball. It will keep him/her safe and keep you entertained. They're found in many pet stores as "Run-About Balls". You'll need the Giant or Mega size.

Beds: A plastic pet igloo makes an excellent hideaway and place to sleep for your hedgegie. Most pet stores carry them. Just place a nice warm fleece blanket inside, and he or she will stay nice and cozy. You can also use hedgegie bags, hedgegie hats or just a pile of fleece blankets. Just remember that hedgies want to be covered, so they have to have a secure place to sleep. We find fleece blankets to be the best, cut to 12x12 or 14x14 sizes. You can get quite a few blankets out of a yard of fleece. Once again, don't use anything with loose threads.

Socializing Your Hedgehog

So you have a new hedgehog and s/he is a sharp-quilled, tight ball of hissing, popping and clicking attitude???! Don't despair; this happens ALL the time and doesn't mean that your pet will act like this forever. Hopefully, if you pet comes from a breeder s/he will be well-socialized when you get it, but this isn't always the case. Hedgehogs usually act defensively out of fear. Give your pet ample time to adjust (sometimes months). Daily handling is important. Let your

pet sit on your lap while you watch TV or work on your computer. Make sure they have something they can hide under. Keep your hand available, but let hedgegie make the first move. Talk softly to the hedgegie, and try to offer a favorite treat like a mealie or a bit of chicken. You can also take an old tee shirt that you've worn or sleep with one of your hedgehog's blankets and put it in their sleeping area. This way they will learn to associate your scent with security. Above all else, BE PATIENT. There are the occasional hedgehogs that prefer not to be snuggled and will, at best, put up with being picked held. This doesn't mean that they still won't make a wonderful companion. You need to respect their boundaries, and not push them.

Light and Temperature

Hedgehogs are by nature nocturnal or crepuscular mammals, meaning they are awake at night and sleep most of the day, or are awake at dusk, dawn, and for periods during the night. Please do NOT try to change their "inner clock" just to make it easier for you to interact with them. Despite the fact that they sleep during the day, they still should be situated in a bright room during the day and a dark room at night to mimic what they would have in the wild. It's best to interact with them in the early to late evening or very early morning.

We cannot stress this enough! KEEP YOUR HEDGEHOG WARM! Anything below 70 degrees or so for a room temperature can cause hibernation attempts which will lead to lethargy, unwillingness to eat and/or drink, illness and quite often death. Equally important is that hedgegies do not tolerate extremely high temperature either. There is always room for variance, but in general, a good range is a room temperature between 72-80 degrees. Some hedgehogs will require supplemental heat, especially in the winter or when air-conditioning is set very low. You can use a human-type heating pad placed UNDER the cage at one end (to allow room for your hedgegie to move away from the heat source) or an electric blanket draped over the cage. Some heating pads or blankets have automatic shut-offs, so make sure to reset it to ON. A small ceramic or electric space heater can also be used. Please use an electrical heating device with extreme caution; they can short out or overheat causing burns or death to your pet.

If you ever pick up a hedgehog and s/he is limp, lethargic and feels cold to the touch, it IS an emergency situation. This is a hibernation attempt and your pet needs to be warmed quickly, but not too quickly. The best way to do this is to put them under your shirt against your skin. This can take as much as an hour, but if your pet doesn't start to come around in that amount of time, you MUST get him or her to a vet.

Diet

This is a very important subject for hedgehog owners. Hedgehogs are susceptible to many cancers and other health issues; therefore, diet is very important to their overall health. Since we don't know as much about hedgehogs as some other animals, there are many different opinions as to what they really need in their diets. We feel that it's best to give them a varied, well-balanced diet. In the wild hedgehogs are insectivores eating mainly insects, small reptiles and an occasional egg if they can get it. A good diet would consist of food that is high in protein and low in fat. We suggest a main diet of a good quality cat kibble (about a tablespoon) a day. One of our members sells a mix of very good quality kibble (usually 8-15 different types in her mix). She keeps track of any recalls that may occur and sells this for a very good price per pound, even with the shipping. You can find more information about her food at http://web.me.com/cierrawolf/Site/Thistle_Dew_Hedgehogs.html. You can also supplement the kibble with either some canned cat food (about a teaspoon), baby food meat or poultry or cooked chicken, turkey, or salmon (all without seasoning). It's also fine to give you little one an

occasional bit of scrambled eggs. You can also give just a dab (less than 1/8 tsp.) of fruits or vegetables, either cooked or baby food. Some favorites seem to be sweet potatoes, applesauce, pears, and watermelon. DO NOT feed your hedgehog grapes, raisins, nuts or avocado!!! Your hedgegie should also have daily treats of mealworms, wax, worms, silk worms or crickets. You can feed them live or buy them canned. Canned spoil quickly, so you put them on a plate, freeze them, returned them to the washed and dried can and store them in the freezer until you're ready to use them. DO NOT feed Super Worms because they do bite! DO NOT feed your hedgehog fresh caught bugs as they can carry parasites, pesticides and other chemicals. Even if you don't spray in your yard, your neighbor may! Many guardians keep kibble in the cage at all times and offer the fresh food in the evening which is fine. A lot of hedgehogs like to get up mid-day for a snack and some water.

Nail Trimming

Many people are intimidated by nail trimming, and almost all hedgehogs hate it. Nevertheless, it needs to be done, as their nails can curl and grow into the pads of their feet and/or grow so long as to impair normal walking which can, over time, cripple your hedgegie. One of the easier ways we've found to trim nails, is to put your hedgegie in an inch of warm water which will make them uncurl. Carefully take one foot at a time, and clip each nail, being careful not to cut so short as to make them bleed. Since they're in water, the hedgehog *might* be more likely to stay uncurled. You can use regular nail clippers, small manicure scissors, or the scissors-style cat trimmers. If a nail does bleed (and it's happened to all of us), use some cornstarch or flour to stop the bleeding. You can also use a commercially available styptic powder for pets, but they have been reported to cause stinging. Some hedgehogs are easier to handle out of water. A good way is to either wrap your hedgegie in a towel or blanket and grab one foot at a time, or roll your hedgegie on its back and wait for it to try to unroll and grab a foot. If you have two people available have one hold the hedgegie letting a paw drop down between your fingers so the second person can grab it and clip. We don't recommend taking your hedgehog to the vet for a nail clipping unless it's absolutely necessary because there's always a risk in gassing an animal, but if they're at the vet for another reason, might as well as them to do it while your hedgegie is under.

Well-Hedgie Vet Exam

It is a good idea to find a vet before you bring your hedgegie home. Not all vets have experience with hedgehogs, so you want to talk to the vet, and don't be afraid to ask questions. If you have trouble finding a vet in your area, there is a member-generated and constantly updated list of hedgehog-experienced vets at www.hedgehogwelfare.org. Once your new hedgegie is settled in, it's always a good idea to schedule an exam for two reasons. The first is obvious. You want to make sure your hedgehog is in good health. When you get your hedgehog, make sure you ask about a health warranty whether from a breeder or a pet store. The second reason is so your vet will have a baseline history to go by should you're hedgehog get sick later. Be sure to bring a fresh fecal with you when you go in to check for parasites. On a well-hedgie exam, you can expect your vet to weigh your hedgehog and check for any outward signs of illness such as quill loss, discharge from the eyes or ears, raggedy ears, and any obvious foot problems, etc. He should also listen to your hedgegie's heart and lungs, look in the ears, palpate the abdomen for any signs of masses and check in his/her mouth for any signs of dental problems or masses. Most hedgehogs will relax enough after a few minutes to have this done without the use of gas. Your vet should also discuss with you how your hedgehog is housed and what you're feeding it and any concerns you may have regarding their care.

Common Health Concerns

Hedgehogs are very good at hiding illness, so if there's any doubt see your veterinarian.

Fatty Liver Disease (FLD): Symptoms usually are not evident until the disease has dangerously progressed, the most obvious being a jaundiced appearance, most evident on or around the belly. Caused by a diet too high in fat, or sudden severe weight gain or weight loss which causes the liver to deposit fat.

Mites: Mites may or may not cause symptoms. They are usually not visible to the eye. Your vet can do a skin scraping if they are suspected. Suspect mites if your hedgegie is itching excessively (which could also be dry skin), losing a *lot* of quills (most often in clumps) or suddenly develops raggedy ears (which could also be fungal related).

Raggedy Ears: Possible mites or fungal infection. You can try bag balm, cocoa butter or shea butter on them to see if they clear up. If they don't, or if they do and the problem returns, schedule a vet visit.

Cancer: Hedgehogs are prone to several different cancers. Know the background of your hedgehog, if at all possible, as many cancers seem to be genetic. Always schedule a vet visit if you notice any lumps, bumps, discolorations, bleeding, abnormal behavior, lack of appetite, or anything "different" than the norm that causes you concern. Cancers can spread rapidly, so don't put off the vet visit.

Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome (WHS): WHS is a degenerative myelopathy. It usually presents with a "wobbliness" and/or inability to walk normally or tipping to one side (these symptoms could also be caused by ear infections). WHS is a progressive to complete paralysis and is fatal. It cannot be diagnosed with certainty except by a necropsy after death. The disease is genetically acquired and is "spread" by the breeding of carriers. Many of the veterinarians at www.hedgehogwelfare.org have experience with this disease, or you can join the Hedgehog Welfare Yahoo Group list, many of whose members have extensive experience in caring of a hedgehog with WHS. Also, you can find some great information about it at <http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/comemeetmyfamily/tableofcontents.html>.

Breeding

A USDA license is generally required to breed, sell or trade hedgehogs. Breeding these animals is a very serious undertaking, and many things can go wrong with the mother during pregnancy and delivery of her babies. PLEASE consider this carefully before deciding you want to breed. Hedgehogs are *capable* of breeding as early as 5 to 6 weeks of age, so please ALWAYS keep males and females separated. Opinions differ on this, but most people feel you should not breed a female before 6 months or after 2 years. If you should decide to breed or find yourself with a pregnant female (this sometimes happens with pet store hedgegies that have been housed with a male), please join the Breeders Helping Breeders Yahoo Group for expert advice from experienced breeders.

Legal Issues

Make sure before acquiring a hedgehog that they are legal where you live. It is illegal to possess a hedgehog in Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, Pennsylvania and Washington D.C. They are legal in the state of New York but illegal in all five boroughs of New York City. There

are also some local ordinances that make it illegal to own exotic animals.

Links for More Information on Hedgehogs

There is a lot of information and books available on hedgehog ownership. However, some do NOT give good information. Some of the websites with good information are listed below.

www.hedgehogwelfare.org - This society was set up to serve the hedgehog owning community and the animals they love so much. Education, rescue and rehab is stressed, an online store is provided, there is a veterinarian list spanning the US and Canada, adoption and relinquishment forms and much more.

www.hedgehogclub.com - This is the website for The International Hedgehog Assn. that sanctions hedgehog conformation shows in the US but also has extensive information on caring for your hedgehog, reputable breeders, registering your hedgehog with the IHA, narrowing down the color of your hedgehog and much more.

www.hedgehogcentral.com - A site made up of many of the IHA and HWS members, lots of information on the care of hedgehog as well as live chats where you can ask questions and get an immediate answer for knowledgeable people.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wa2/comemeetmyfamily/tableofcontents.html> - A very large and comprehensive website on every aspect of the African hedgehog from veteran hedgehog owner Laura Ledet. Many photos, product and site links, rescue and adoption sites, licensed breeders list and much, much more.