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## HEDGEHOG CARE

African hedgehogs (*Atherixer albiventris*) have been bred in captivity for only about 10–15 years in this country and there is still much to be learned about their nutritional and husbandry needs. They live in the wild in many countries including Africa, hence the name, and are ground dwelling, nocturnal, spiny mammals. Their spines are not poisonous or barbed, like porcupines, and the spines do not come out unless stressed, sick, or during the normal “quilling” process at about 8-12 weeks old. During “quilling”, a baby hedgehog loses and replaces baby spines with adult spines. The purpose of the spines is for protection and when threatened, hedgehogs roll up into a tight ball. They are solitary animals and should be housed separately to avoid aggression and injury. During the daytime, hedgehogs will often sleep under a rock, in a hole, or in a bush or thick grass. They typically dig a hole for shelter and some species of hedgehogs hibernate. Hedgehogs prefer a warmer climate with temperatures ranging from 72°F to 85°F, or average room temperature. Keeping hedgehogs as pets is still illegal in some states so it is important to check your state laws before acquiring this animal for a pet. The captive lifespan of a hedgehog is about 4-7 years, but can be longer depending on appropriate diet and care.

### Nutrition

In the wild, it is known that they eat insects, snails, snakes, lizards, mice, frogs, vegetables, and fruits, as well as dead and decaying animal material. The biggest problem clearly related to captive hedgehog diets has been obesity. This is probably due to the inappropriately high calorie diet and little exercise due to small housing conditions.

A light or reduced calorie high quality dry cat food is best, if you cannot find a food specifically formulated for hedgehogs. (Kitten and ferret foods are too high in calories.) To prevent obesity it is best to feed a measured amount of food daily. Although still in the research phases, it is thought that about 100 calories of food daily will meet the nutritional requirement for a captive hedgehog. In addition, a teaspoon per day of chopped mixed vegetables and/or fruits such as beans, carrots, apples, pears, berries, squash, peas, potatoes, tomatoes, etc. Live insects such as crickets, mealworms, or earthworms can be offered three to four times a week. Waxworms should be avoided due to their high fat content. Non-breeding pets should not be fed dairy products or eggs because of the high fat content.

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## Housing and Toys

The enclosure or cage that you choose should be a minimum of 24" X 24" but the larger the better. Hedgehogs are good climbers so the cage should have a secure lid to prevent escape and a solid floor. (Wire cage floors can cause injuries because legs can fall through and get broken.) Since hedgehogs are burrowers, bedding choices can include pressed paper bedding, aspen wood shavings, or shredded newspaper. Astroturf can also be used but does not allow natural burrowing behaviors, which will limit their activity needs and should be compensated for in other ways. Avoid corn cob or cedar shaving because these can harbor toxins and fungi that can cause illness. The bedding thickness ideally should be at least 2" in depth to allow normal digging behaviors. Hedgehogs are fairly fastidious so cleaning their bedding at least once a week is a must to prevent illness.

Cage furniture should include an exercise wheel made for guinea pigs or specifically for hedgehogs to allow for the needed exercise to prevent obesity. The diameter should be at least 11" and it should have a solid floor to prevent injury. They also love to hide when sleeping during the daytime so a critter log, shoebox with a hole, a PVC pipe, or a "hedgebag" can accommodate this need as well. These should be replaced or washed thoroughly about every 2-4 weeks to maintain cleanliness and prevent disease. Heavy ceramic food dishes are necessary to prevent spilling of the food and should be cleaned daily. Water bottles are the preferred method of providing water but it is important to check the sipper apparatus daily to ensure that the ball is not stuck, which can prevent water from being dispensed from the sipper.

Hedgehogs are very curious animals at night time and need things to keep them busy to push, chew, and manipulate. A variety of toys can be offered such as large plastic toy trucks, small rubber balls, toilet paper tubes, and rawhide chews. Whatever you choose, be creative and cautious to make sure the item is safe for the hedgehog to have.



Photo from [african-pygmy-hedgehogs.jpg](#)

## Handling

The more you handle your hedgehog, the quicker it will get used to you. Allow him/her to have a few days to a week to acclimate to his surroundings and then begin to handle him more and more. To pick it up, slide your fingers under the belly and lift to avoid the spines and distribute the animal's weight over all of your fingers. When you first adopt it, your hedgehog may curl up and hiss at you as a defense mechanism. Do not let this intimidate you. Go slow and give him/her time to adjust to you.

## **Common Diseases**

Obesity is the most common nutritional disease of pets, and hedgehogs are no exception. Limiting high calorie food items and maintaining good exercise are the key to preventing obesity in your pet hedgehog.

Cancer has also been found to be very common in pet hedgehogs. Cancer has been reported to affect almost every organ. The treatment depends on the area affected. It is unknown why hedgehogs have such a high rate of cancer but more research is currently being done to determine the cause.

There are a host of other common health conditions in hedgehogs, ranging from skin disease to pasturella. Hedgehogs are good at masking the signs of disease until they are very ill, so careful attention should be paid to even subtle changes in appetite or activity, with veterinary intervention as soon as possible if there is a concern. Annual exams are recommended to help detect early medical problems and prevent disease.

## ***References:***

- VeterinaryPartner.com @[www.veterinarypartner.com](http://www.veterinarypartner.com)
- Hedgehog Valley website @ <http://hedgehogvalley.com/basiccare.html>
- Teresa Gregory, DVM