



# Milwood Animal Clinic

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## Care of Hedgehogs

*There are quite a few sources of information on pet care available over the internet, some of which offer correct information. Others sources can be incorrect and harmful to your pet. Please consult with your veterinarian before making lifestyle, feeding, handling or caging changes.*

*Small caged pets can be wonderful companions and learning experiences for children. However, young children should not be assigned full time caretaker duties. A missed meal or a lack of water to drink can be life-threatening for small animals that must have a constant supply of food and hydration available to survive. Plan on supervising your children's care of their pet every day.*



### Natural History

A hedgehog is a small spiny mammal of which there are approximately seventeen species naturally inhabiting parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Their small bodies are covered with spines except for their faces and underbellies. These spines do not release and impale predators as do those of a porcupine, but rather form a prickly, pokey barrier when the hedgehog rolls into a ball, protecting its face and underbelly. The main predators of hedgehogs are owls, weasels, fox, mongoose and wolves.

Although originally thought to eat only insects, it is now known that hedgehogs feed on many things in the wild: snails, small reptiles and amphibians, bird eggs, carrion, mushrooms, grass, roots, berries and melons as well as insects. Hedgehogs are solitary animals, building dens or sleeping under brush, in rocky alcoves or in tall grass during the day and foraging over long distances at night. In the wild they are able to hibernate and will do so depending on climate conditions and food availability.

The name *hedgehog* came into use around the year 1450, probably due to the fact that they live in and around hedgerows and have a pig-like snout. Hedgehogs have only recently become popular as pets, with the most common domesticated type being the African Pygmy hedgehog, a hybrid of the White-bellied or Four-toed Hedgehog and the Algerian Hedgehog. Hedgehogs are illegal to keep as pets in some countries as well as certain states in the United States. This is to prevent them from establishing themselves as invasive species and altering natural ecosystems or introducing diseases.



### Handling

Hedgehogs are nocturnal. For this reason, feeding and socializing them in the late afternoon or early evening is very important. Hedgehogs are solitary and should be kept separated except when breeding. Females are usually

easier to handle than males. Hedgehogs require daily handling in order to socialize them. It is best to handle your hedgehog with bare hands instead of blankets or gloves so they will be better acclimated to your touch. If your hedgehog has its spines erect, use your hands as scoops on either side and gently scoop him up from the bottom. Hold him in your hands without further prodding or petting, waiting and allowing him to come un-prickled in your hands. It can take time to socialize your hedgehog, but by being consistent and gentle you can accustom your hedgehog to being handled. Remember that hedgehogs are timid and can be easily frightened. While they are not aggressive, they can bite if provoked.

### **Sounds and body language**

Hedgehogs have their own unique behaviors that are not found in other small pet animals. A happy, comfortable hedgegie will purr and whistle in contentment. Your pet will also make little snuffling sounds when investigating his environment.

When your pet is frightened or displeased, he will extend his spines, making himself prickly and warning off intruders. Rolling into a ball is a defensive behavior when your pet is frightened.

Hedgehogs will occasionally perform a ritual called self-anointing. When the animal encounters a new scent, it will lick and bite the source, then form a scented froth in its mouth and paste it on its spines with its tongue. The specific purpose of this ritual is unknown, but some experts believe anointing gives the hedgehog a scent of the area, camouflaging it from predators. It may also provide a possible poison or source of infection to predators poked by their spines.

### **Hibernation**

A common concern is whether or not pet hedgehogs should hibernate, especially as winter starts to arrive. The answer is generally no. Your pet must be very healthy to survive hibernation even if it is properly controlled. Most households are not equipped for this. Hibernating an unhealthy hedgegie or one with unknown underlying health issues can be fatal. However, if the temperature where your pet is kept drops too low (below 68 degrees F) he can start preparing for hibernation. If the temperature drops much the hog may hibernate for brief periods, depending on how long the colder temperature is maintained. If the hedgehog doesn't respond to stimulation, then it needs to be warmed up. Another sign a hedgehog may be too cool, is decreased appetite or loss of appetite altogether. A chilled hedgehog will walk as if it is dizzy, or inebriated. If your hedgehog isn't eating, and is walking a bit funny, it may be because he is too cool. These signs may also indicate serious illness. If these signs do not resolve when your hog is warmed up, contact your veterinarian immediately.



### **Housing**

Hedgehogs should be kept indoors at about 68-80 degrees F. Lower temperatures can cause them to begin hibernation. There are health dangers associated with this and it is not recommended for your pet. Provide general lighting, not direct sunlight which can overheat and stress your pet. Also keep in mind that your hedgehog is naturally nocturnal, so he should live in an area of the house that is not too active during the day.

While your hedgehog is a small animal, it needs lots of room. Make sure the cage is large enough to allow for sufficient exercise. Some owners provide a larger exercise area for supervised exercise. Hedgehogs like to climb, so they will need a cage with a top. The cage needs to have a

solid floor rather than wire. Wire flooring is risky as their little feet can become caught in it. Include accessories to allow for climbing and hiding as hedgehogs are quite active. They are naturally foragers so they need interesting things to do in their environment to be happy. Hedgehogs enjoy spreading out on rocks and using them for scratching. Some hedgehogs enjoy exercise wheels. Do not use wheels made of wire as they can cause foot and leg injury. Any cage must also be well ventilated. Aquariums are sometimes used at caging, but they are heavy, difficult to clean and not well ventilated.

A hiding place is a must for your hedgehog. Being shy creatures, one of the most important things you can do for your pet hedgehog is to provide him with a place to feel secure. A hide box such as a wood box, a plastic flower pot on its side, or a 4" diameter PVC pipe is perfect as a private and secure hiding or sleeping area.

### Bedding and Bowls

A paper based bedding such as Carefresh litter can be used. Bedding should be several inches deep to allow for burrowing. Never use cedar or pine bedding as they can contain oils that are irritating to the respiratory tract and eyes. Keep bedding clean and dry with frequent changes. Another common substrate is cloth. If you go this route, you will need to have several different fabric squares, as you need to replace a dirty one with a clean one as soon as possible.



Using a wide food bowl is recommended because of the tendency to tip over (ceramic crocks designed for small rodents are good food dishes). A water bottle or dish should be used for water. If you use a water dish, be sure to change it if any debris from the cage collects in it. Bedding in the dish can absorb a lot of water and not allow your hedgehog enough to drink.

### Exercise

Hedgehogs need exercise. Since they are good climbers, logs can be arranged in the enclosure to form caves, tunnels and arches. Hedgehogs will also use exercise wheels. Exercise wheels specifically designed for hedgehogs are safest as they do not have a wire surface. Small, child-safe toys can be provided but need to be cleaned frequently. If exercising your hog outside of the cage, make sure it is supervised closely. Keep the hog away from risk factors like electrical cords and stairways or drop offs. Exercise balls should not be used as the hog's feet are very small and run the risk of amputation; or broken legs can result if caught in the openings. Never allow other pets in the home such as cats or dogs access to your hedgegie.

### Diet

Hedgehogs are omnivores and should be fed a diet that is high in protein and low in fat. Commercial diets formulated specifically for hedgehogs are the most reliable way to ensure that your hedgegie is getting the proper nutrition and should be used if at all possible. We recommend Mazuri Hedgehog Diet.



A mixture of vegetables and insects such as crickets, mealworms, or silkworms should also be fed daily.

Obesity is a common problem, so avoid high fat diets, such as a low quality kitten food, too many wax or mealworms. "Free feeding" or always keeping the food dish full, should be avoided. Hedgehogs should be fed in the late afternoon or early evening since they are nocturnal. The amount of food given in the evening should be almost gone by morning. Only a small

amount of food may be available during the day for snacking. Fresh water should be available at all times. You may bring your hedgegie in to Milwood Animal Clinic at any time to be weighed at no charge.

### **Cleaning**

Keep the bedding and/or litter changed regularly so bacteria doesn't build up to contribute to infections or breathing problems. Keep your hedgehog's cage, toys, and food and water dishes cleaned regularly with hot soapy water, and always be sure to rinse thoroughly before returning the hedgehog back to the enclosure. Hedgehogs are actually quite good swimmers! For bathing, fill a bathtub or sink with about 5-6 inches of lukewarm water (no soap!) and be sure to supervise your hog as it swims around. You may also lightly brush the spines with a toothbrush if needed.

### **Health Risk to Humans**

Hedgehogs can potentially be carriers of Salmonella. Be sure to wash your hands thoroughly after handling your pet. Do not allow the hedgehog to come into contact with human food or cooking utensils.

### **Health**

The most important ways to keep your pet Hedgehog healthy is to follow the guidelines provided by your veterinarian regarding proper caging, handling and feeding of your pet. These things, combined with close daily observation, attention to detail and regular check ups with your veterinarian will help ensure that your pet enjoys a long healthy life.

Hedgehogs should have a physical exam performed by an exotic veterinarian every 6 months to 1 year. If you suspect any illness or unusual condition, have your hedgehog examined by a veterinarian. **Common problems are** obesity, mites, respiratory disease, dental problems, gastrointestinal problems, and tumors.

Observe you pet daily for changes in behavior, activity level, eating habits, and bowel habits. Having a pet that is comfortable with handling is a great benefit so that it can be examined up close on a daily basis. Inspect spines, feet and toes, eyes, nose and mouth, ears and hind end cleanliness as you handle your pet.

A hedgehog's health situation can change quickly and changes need to be addressed quickly. If your pet has a change in eating habits, especially lack of appetite, or diarrhea, it could be signaling serious problems developing. Be on the lookout for sneezing, excessive dropping of quills, changes in posture or activity such as sleeping excessively.

*Report abnormalities or changes to your veterinarian right away. Small pets can become very ill very rapidly. Decreased energy, a loss of appetite and changes in bowel movements are serious concerns. Any injury has the potential to be life-threatening.*

