

# Hedgehogs

The African pygmy hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*), also known as the 4-toed or white-bellied hedgehog, originates from central Africa. Hedgehogs are crepuscular creatures (active at dawn and dusk) that spend much of their daytime hours sleeping. Short spines cover the crown of their head and back, while coarse, dense fur covers the rest of the body. The average life span of the African pygmy hedgehog ranges from 5-8 years.

## Diet

African hedgehogs are insectivorous mammals very prone to obesity in captivity. Commercial hedgehog food or dry, low-calorie cat food should make up the bulk of the adult diet (2-3 teaspoons daily). Supplement the diet daily with 1-2 teaspoons of chopped, mixed vegetables and/or fruit as well as insects. Three to four crickets or mealworms or one earthworm may be offered. Because of their crepuscular nature, feed hedgehogs during the evening. Make fresh water available at all times in a shallow ceramic dish or water bottle.

## Caging

Keep your hedgehog in a smooth-sided enclosure at least one foot high. Provide floor space of at least 16 x 24 in (40 x 60 cm) is recommended. Avoid wire cages as hedgehogs will frequently try to climb the walls and will get their toenails caught. Recommended beddings include recycled paper product (i.e. CareFRESH<sup>®</sup>, Absorption Corp) or aspen shavings.

Place your hedgehog's home in a well-lit area free of drafts and direct sunlight. Hedgehogs are most comfortable at temperatures between 65-80°F (18-27°C).

## Cage furniture

- Provide a hiding place for your hedgehog. This can be as simple as a piece of 4 in (10 cm) PVC pipe or an old shoebox with a hole cut in one end. Replace cardboard boxes every 2-3 weeks.
- Your pet will use a litter pan if provided with one. Place a shallow box or tray 2-3 in (5-8 cm) deep should be low enough to allow your hedgehog to climb in with little or no effort. Half-fill the pan with dust-free, non-clumping cat litter. Some hedgehogs begin to use their litter pan very quickly, while others take more time. Be patient.
- An exercise wheel will help your hedgehog remain trim and healthy. Although a guinea pig wheel will suffice, a commercially available "Hedgehog Wheel" is safer since it has a solid or mesh-covered running surface to prevent toes or limbs from getting caught.

## Handling/Behavior

Hedgehogs startle easily, but they can be approached and slowly tamed when approached with care and patience.

- Start by looking and listening to your pet. Chirping, whistling and purring sounds usually indicate your hedgehog feels safe and content. A snorting, hissing or clicking animal is frightened or aggravated.
- Body language may also be used to evaluate your hedgehog. When frightened, hedgehogs will curl up into a ball with their spines erect to protect the face and soft, vulnerable belly. Most hedgehogs slowly uncurl

after a few minutes. If only the spines on the head are erect, this usually means the hedgehog is cautious and uncertain. When the spines lie flat on the body, your hedgehog is calm and comfortable.

There are over 5,000 spines on the hedgehog. Young hedgehogs will shed their spines starting at about 2 to 6 months of age. During this period of shedding, your hedgehog may hiss, roll into a ball for long periods of time, or exhibit a poor appetite. It is acceptable to handle your hedgehog during shedding, just be careful and patient. Shedding usually takes about a month, and afterwards your hedgehog will return to normal behavior.

“Anting” is a normal behavior performed when a hedgehog is confronted by a new object or smell in its environment. The hedgehog will lick the new object repeatedly until it begins to drool, and then groom its skin and spines with frothy saliva. This behavior may go last for minutes or up to an hour.