

Hedgehogs

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Hedgehogs are nocturnal insectivorous mammals belonging to the family *Erinaceidae*. Two species of hedgehogs are kept as pets, the European hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) and the African Pygmy hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*). The African Pygmy hedgehog is the species kept in the United States. The European hedgehog can grow to twelve inches in length and nearly three pounds in weight. By contrast, the African hedgehog only measures six to nine inches in length and about one pound in weight. The normal coloration is white or cream colored ventrum and face, with white and black or brown banded quills. They raise their quills and roll into a tight ball as a defensive mechanism.

Pet Suitability

Hedgehogs are not appropriate pets for everyone. These pets are best suited for adults and older children because of the prickly quills that can injure a child. They are solitary and nocturnal animals, which is in contrast to the behavioral characteristics of more traditional pets. The average life span in captivity is four to six years, with potential longevity of nearly ten years of age.

Living Conditions

Hedgehogs are very active and energetic at night, requiring room to run and exercise away from the owner's sleeping quarters. Wild hedgehogs travel a territory of 650 to 1000 feet in diameter daily in search of food. In addition to a large cage, an exercise wheel can be provided for running. Hedgehogs also enjoy burrowing in deep substrate. Most hedgehogs can be trained to use a litter box if provided in an area away from the feeding and sleeping sections. Plastic tubes or small boxes can be provided to satisfy the need for privacy and shelter. Hedgehogs prefer an ambient temperature between 75° and 80°F with low humidity. Lower temperatures result in lethargy and anorexia to nearly a hibernation state if persistently cold. Hedgehogs can be overheated when temperatures are above 90°F.

Nutrition

Although classified as insectivores, hedgehogs accept an omnivorous diet in captivity. The natural diet consists primarily of insects, worms, snails and small mammals. In addition, hedgehogs are known to ingest eggs, fruit, roots, small reptiles, amphibians and small fish. The nutritional requirements of captive hedgehogs have not been fully established. The basis of the recommended captive diet includes high quality dry cat food or commercial dry hedgehog diet. It is important that the diet is low in iron with a relatively high protein level. Fresh insects are an important natural component to the diet. Cooked egg, low-fat cottage cheese and lean meat, such as poultry or fish, can also be provided at a maximum of one teaspoon daily. A small portion of fruit or vegetables can also be offered. Obesity is common in hedgehogs, therefore adjust the diet and increase exercise when they appear overweight.