HEDGEHOG CARE

What is a hedgehog?

A hedgehog is a small, insectivorous (insect-eating) mammal. There are 17 species found throughout the world. The species most commonly kept as pets is the four-toed, or African pygmy hedgehog. Hedgehogs are nocturnal and can be quite shy. They come in several colors and patterns. Hedgehogs are generally considered solitary and may be kept by themselves.

What should I know before adopting a hedgehog?

Hedgehogs are exotic pets that require specialized care. You should be familiar with which veterinarians see exotic pets for both routine care as well as emergencies. Hedgehogs are active, nocturnal animals that are prone to physical and behavioral problems if their needs are not met. Hedgehogs need high-quality, high-protein food, including live prey such as meal worms and crickets. They are covered in spines and have the potential to bite, and as such, may not be an appropriate pet for young children without adult supervision.

How do I house and care for my hedgehog?

HOUSING

- The enclosure should be the largest one possible. At a bare minimum, a hedgehog should have a cage that is 18″x24″. It should be large enough to contain all of the things the hedgehog needs. Cages with multiple levels can provide additional space; however, you should keep in mind that while they are good at climbing up, hedgehogs have poor vision and are not always good at climbing down. Falls can be a risk. Hedgehogs should not be housed on wire flooring. Glass aquariums or large plastic tubs can be used as housing, but care should be taken to ensure that there is adequate ventilation. Most pet stores will have an appropriate enclosure for hedgehogs.
- For bedding, there are a variety of options. Fleece or other fabric covers are generally considered the best option to cover flooring and must be washed regularly to keep them clean. Other bedding options include aspen wood shavings or recycled paper bedding, such as Carefresh. Care should be taken with shavings or paper bedding, as this can accumulate on the hedgehog's urogenital area. Pine or cedar shavings should never be used, as these woods can be toxic to hedgehogs and many other small pets.
- Hedgehogs should always have access to fresh water. Water can be provided in a shallow dish or in a water bottle made for small pets. A water bowl is more difficult to keep clean, but some hedgehogs will only drink from a bowl.
- A hedgehog's environment should be kept between 75°F and 80°F. An additional heat source may be required if the ambient temperature of the room is too low. A space heater can be used to raise the temperature of the room the hedgehog is kept in. If that is not practical, other options may include ceramic heat emitters, heat lamps (using a red or "moonlight" bulb to avoid disturbing your pet's nocturnal habits) or under-tank heaters (not for use under plastic cages). All heat sources have their downsides. Make sure you choose a safe and appropriate heat source and read all of the product instructions carefully.

ENRICHMENT

- Hedgehogs are very active animals and in the wild have been known to roam as much as five to six miles per night. A wheel is required to provide an outlet for this energy. Wheels should be large in size (at least 11″) and have a solid plastic or metal surface. Wheels that are made of wire mesh or wire rungs are not appropriate and can cause injury. Wheels should be cleaned daily; hedgehogs usually defecate as they run and can soil the running surface of the wheel quickly.
- Hedgehogs can be provided with toys such as cat balls, paper towel tubes, large diameter PVC pipes (4″ or more in diameter) or small pet tunnels. Small blankets can also be provided for the hedgehog to cuddle under. Some hedgehogs enjoy exploring the environment outside their cage in a "run-about" ball, but will need one of the larger sizes (11″ or more in diameter). Hedgehogs also enjoy a hideaway like a plastic igloo.

GROOMING

- Hedgehogs require some grooming, including regular nail trims. Not all hedgehogs tolerate nail trims easily, so it may be possible to only trim a few nails at a time. Nail trims are important and not to be skipped. If they are not trimmed regularly, the nails can curl into your pet's paws and make walking painful and difficult, and potentially lead to infection.
- Hedgehogs can also require regular bathing. The amount of bathing varies depending on the individual hedgehog, and some will require more frequent bathing than others. The hedgehog can be placed in warm water up to its belly, and a toothbrush and mild shampoo can be used to clean the hedgehog's feet, quills and any other soiled areas.

What do I feed my hedgehog?

Hedgehogs are insectivores and in the wild would eat a variety of small insects. As pets, hedgehogs are most commonly fed a high-quality commercial cat food that is high in protein and low in fat as the main staple of their diet. This diet is supplemented with live or canned crickets and meal worms, though these feeder insects can be high in fat so they should be provided in limited amounts. Some owners also provide cooked, unseasoned chicken, turkey or salmon and small amounts of fruits and vegetables.

How do I socialize my hedgehog?

Hedgehogs are shy by nature and may take some time to get used to handling. The best way to get a hedgehog used to handling is to spend time with it regularly. Frequent, short periods of handling are better than long periods of interaction on an infrequent basis. To handle them, you can start by gently holding the hedgehog and allowing it to uncurl. Leather gloves or a towel can be used at first to protect your hands from the spines. As the hedgehog becomes more comfortable with your scent, it will begin to explore. With time and trust, you may be able to stroke the spines and handle your pet with ease.

REFERENCES

- http://www.hedgehogwelfare.org/Hedgehog_Care_Sheet.pdf
- http://www.hedgehogwelfare.org/Hedgehog_FAQs.pdf
- http://www.hedgehogsaspets.com/how-to-bathe-your-pet-hedgehog/
- http://www.faqs.org/faqs/hedgehog-faq/part1/preamble.html