Hedgehog Husbandry and Health
By: Natasha Brooke

General Information
African pygmy hedgehogs are popular pets in North America. They grow to be 200-500 grams and have a lifespan of 5-7 years. Hedgehogs are coated with quills on their backside and fur on their underside. They come in a variety of colors such as salt and pepper, pinto, apricot, cinnamon, and albino. Hedgehogs make excellent pets, but in order to create a relationship with their owners they must be handled regularly at a young age. Hedgehogs are born with soft quills just below the skin and within hours of birth, these quills emerge from the skin. These quills become thicker and harder as they grow. At approximately 6-8 weeks of age, they start to lose their quills as new adult quills grow in and for some hedgehogs this can be a painful process. It is important to monitor for excessive quill loss, as this could be a sign of mites or ringworm. When threatened, hedgehogs raise their quills, hiss, jump, or pull themselves into a ball.

Housing and Feeding
Wire cages are not recommended for hedgehogs, as they like to climb and may hurt themselves on the wire. A smooth sided plastic container with tall sides is best and should be lined with newspaper and bedding material. It is important that all hedgehogs have access to a wheel. Hedgehogs are natural wanderers that walk several miles a night. A wheel allows them the level of activity they require and helps prevent obesity. They should be provided with a shelter where they can sleep during the day or hide when threatened. Plastic or wood shelters make good options.

Hedgehogs are sensitive to scent and prone to upper respiratory conditions. There are several bedding options, but aspen is the bedding of choice as it is less dusty and aromatic than other wood shavings. Recycled newspaper can also be used, but some hedgehogs may ingest it and obstruct their gastrointestinal system. Cages should be completely cleared out and cleaned once or twice a week.

Diet is one of the most critical aspects of hedgehog care. They are natural insectivores, eating worms, crustaceans, and snakes in the wild. As pets, a balanced diet is very important for well being and preventing obesity. Hedgehogs should be provided a low fat, high protein diet. Balanced commercial hedgehog food is available, but low fat cat food can also be used. Dry or live mealworms are high in protein and can be added as treats. A teaspoon of fruit/vegetables should be provided daily. This can include carrots, zucchini, and apples. No dairy or nuts should be allowed in their diet.
Temperature is extremely important in hedgehog care. They need to be kept at a temperature of 70-85°F to prevent hibernation in the winter. Heaters may be necessary in colder areas to provide the ideal temperature.

**Health and Common Problems**

Obesity is the most common health issue seen in hedgehogs. Overfeeding and lack of exercise are the major contributors. Having plenty of room to roam as well as providing a wheel to run on reduces this risk.

Mites are the most common parasite seen in hedgehogs. Excessive quill loss, scratching, dry skin, and scaly ears are suggestive of mites. A vet can perform a tape prep to check for the presence of mites and ivermectin can be used to treat it. Another cause of excessive quill loss and crusty tattered ears is ringworm. Ringworm can be diagnosed with a dermatophyte culture. While mites are not spread to people or other species, ringworm can be transmitted to both.

Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome (WHS) is another common disease in hedgehogs. It is a neurodegenerative disease with no specific signs. Hedgehogs with WHS may exhibit signs such as falling over, wasting, paresis of the legs, and atrophy. The disease progresses from ataxia to complete paralysis. Although it can affect hedgehogs of any age, the average age affected is 18 months. There is no treatment to cure or slow the disease process.

Hedgehogs have long skinny legs and are prone to leg trauma. Thread, string, and hair in the cage can easily wrap around their legs and cause permanent damage.

**Conclusion**

Hedgehogs make excellent pets. They are fairly easy to keep, but can be moody. They require regular handling from a young age in order to socialize them. With good housing and nutrition, and regular visits to the vet, they can live a long healthy life.

**References**
