Hedgehog Basics by Sarah M. Dunaway

The African Pygmy Hedgehog is the most common type sold as pets. The most distinctive trait is their quills which are sharp, not barbed, and hallow covering their head and back. They have between 5000 and 7000. Their coloration can vary including salt and pepper, apricot, cinnamon, pinto, albino, or a combination. These are only used defensively when they are frightened. They are not offensive tools like porcupines which can spray barbed quills.

Life Span
Between five to seven years. Some reach the age of ten.

Diet
Hedgehogs are classified as insectivores; however, they will eat a variety of animal and plant material when available. In the wild, they eat insects, worms, crustaceans, eggs, snakes, fruit, and plants.

In captivity, the most critical points are a balanced diet and preventing obesity. They require a high protein with low fat diet. Options include high quality hedgehog pellets or low fat, dry adult cat food. Mealworms should be added as treats. Other supplemental foods for nutrient variety include carrots, apples, hard boiled eggs, unseasoned pork/chicken, and small amounts of fruits.

The most important step in preventing obesity is weighing the hedgehog frequently and keeping a journal. Adult female hedgehogs should be 350-400 grams, and adult males should be 400-450 grams. The amount fed should be dependent on their body condition. For example, the average male hedgehog should receive 3 teaspoons of low fat dry cat food, 2-3 mealworms, and 1 teaspoon of other supplemental food at first. The diet should be modified by weight loss or gain and if he is finishing the amount offered. If not finishing the entire amount or he is gaining weight, the diet should be reduced.

Do not feed dairy products, nuts, seasoned meats, citrus fruits, grapes, and onions.

Activity
They are primarily nocturnal creatures which means they spend most of the day sleeping and are most active at night. This can often worry or bother new owners that want to socialize with their pet during the day and become aggravated by the sound of them running while they are trying to sleep. Hedgehogs are very active and are noted to wander several miles a night in the wild. It is important that a wheel be provided for them to exhibit this natural behavior and prevent obesity.

Handling
To have a hand tamed and well-behaved hedgehog, a combination of understanding your individual hedgehog’s personality and positively reinforced handling is necessary starting at a young age. Reward your hedgehog with treats such as mealworms when they unfurl so that they are conditioned to welcome you. This will make the relationship stronger and veterinary visits more productive and less stressful.

Bizarre Behavior: Balling Up
This uniquely hedgehog trait is a self-preservation mechanism. When a hedgehog is frightened, they tighten the orbicularis muscle which runs around the edge of their body. This acts like a drawstring which hides their head, belly, feet, and legs beneath their prickly spines.

Bizarre Behavior: Self-Anointing
Hedgehogs have a unique tendency to self-anoint. This is done when they find an object or scent of interest, and they chew/lick the object to create foamy saliva that they then spread around their quills. It is hypothesized that this is a form of scent camouflage from predators.
Housing

Due to their roaming nature, the larger the crate, the better. Common choices are wire guinea pig habitats or extra-long Tupperware containers. They should have room for all the necessary equipment, toys, as well as space to run and burrow. Food and water bowls should be easily accessible. Some hedgehogs prefer drinking from water bottles. A dark hide should be provided that is large enough for the hedgehog to burrow into and turn around. A wheel needs to be provided for their activity level. Other options include a litter box, play pens, and toys.

Bedding is an important aspect of their environment. Factors such as cost, recyclability, dustiness, and scent should all be considered. Hedgehogs are prone to upper respiratory infections and are sensitive to potent odors such as those from cedar shavings. Paper or aspen shavings are the most common and safe options. The enclosure should be cleaned every 1-2 weeks depending on the cleanliness of the hedgehog and if spot cleaning occurs.

The next most important aspect of husbandry is the environmental temperature of the hedgehog. If not maintained at a proper temperature, hibernation will occur which is dangerous and possibly deadly for this species of hedgehog. Depending on the age and individuality of the hedgehog, the necessary temperature ranges between 75-85°F. This can be obtained using space heaters, ceramic heat bulb lamps, and a thermostat to regulate.

Common Ailments

Obesity- This is the most common issue. It is caused by overfeeding and a sedentary lifestyle just like in humans. This is prevented by monitoring weight, limiting fat in their diet, and promoting activity with wheels, supervised outdoor time, and a large enclosure.

Mites- Moderate to severe quill loss, excessive scratching, and scaly skin are signs indicative of mites. The veterinarian would confirm this with a tape prep to search under a microscope for mites. This is treated with ivermectin.

Trauma- Hedgehogs have poor eyesight compared to most animals and are prone to walking off elevations such as table and hands. Falling from a height can cause internal damage. Also, due to their thin legs and toes, it is common to see trauma from thread, carpet, and hair. This can cause permanent damage or limb amputation.

Cancer- This is a common disease that affects most that are over three years of age. The most common type of malignant tumor is oral squamous cell carcinoma which affects the mouth leading to gum enlargement, loose teeth, difficulty eating, and weight loss. The second most common is mammary gland adenocarcinoma which has an incidence rate up to 53%. Swelling on the abdomen are the most common sign. Uterine and ovarian tumors are also common. Surgical removal is the preferred treatment.

Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome (WHs)- This is a neurodegenerative disease that may cause paresis of the legs, muscle atrophy, incoordination, and falling over. It progresses from ataxia to complete paralysis which leads to a poor quality of life. There is no treatment for this process which often affects hedgehogs starting at 1.5 years of age.

Veterinary Care

It is important to bring your new hedgehog to your veterinarian as soon as possible after adoption. This introduces your healthy pet and gives the veterinarian a good baseline for future visits. After this, at minimum yearly wellness exams should be scheduled so to monitor your new pet for the common illness listed below and to keep comfortable with the experience. Some reserved hedgehogs may need sedation to be fully examined. Any changes in weight, attitude, behavior, or mobility warrant an exotic veterinary visit.

Fun Facts: Legalities of Ownership

It is illegal to own hedgehogs in Maine, Arizona, California, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Hawaii, and New York City.

Fun Facts: Bath Time

Some hedgehogs enjoy floating around bathtubs or sinks for short periods of time as enrichment. This should not be done due to drying out their skin.

Resources