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Hedgehogs

Natural History

Hedgehogs are small mammals known for their "spines." They are not related to porcupines as commonly thought, but are in fact related to moles and shrews. Many different species of hedgehogs are known, but the most common pets are the African hedgehog (*Erinaceus albiventris*) and the European hedgehog (*Erinaceus Europaeus*).

Housing

Hedgehogs are solitary creatures, so they should be housed individually. They are very active and require as large a space as possible. At the very least, their enclosure should have a floor space that measures 2' x 3'. Hedgehogs are great escape artists; therefore, a secure lid must be provided. Plastic bottom cages with plastic or wire walls are recommended. However, the wire must be spaced narrowly enough that the hedgehog cannot entrap its head. Bedding should be soft and absorbent. We strongly recommend aspen or pine shavings, hay, or recycled newspaper. Wire, cedar, corncob, or any dusty or scented substrate is not recommended. Any cloth left in the enclosure should have a tight enough weave that toenails are not caught. Soiled bedding should be removed every other day, and the entire bedding should be changed weekly. Hiding places should be provided. Cardboard boxes, wooden boxes, a flowerpot, a cloth bag, or PVC tubing is suitable. An exercise wheel can be placed in the enclosure to provide entertainment for the hedgehog. However, the wheel should be solid. The traditional rodent wheel can cause severe trauma to hedgehog feet and legs. Hedgehogs should be let out of their enclosures daily and supervised. Cardboard tubes and boxes, swimming tubs (hedgehogs are excellent swimmers but should always be supervised), straw, safe climbing structures, and other toys can be provided.

Temperature

Hedgehogs are sensitive to temperature changes. The ideal range is between 75° F and 85° F. However, they will tolerate temperatures between 72° F and 90° F. Hedgehogs can go into a hibernation-like state of inactivity when temperatures are too hot or too cold.

Diet

- Hedgehogs eat mainly invertebrates. However, the nutritional intake of different invertebrates varies greatly. Pet hedgehogs should eat a staple diet of commercial food made particularly for hedgehogs. Typically, hedgehogs consume approximately 1 to 2 teaspoons of hedgehog food daily. Food should not be provided free choice because hedgehogs can easily become very overweight. Hedgehogs can also be given 1 to 2 teaspoons of the following foods: cooked meat or egg or low-fat cottage cheese. They can

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

also be given a daily maximum of half a teaspoon of fruit such as banana, grape, apple, pear, or berries. Insects such as mealworms, earthworms, waxworms, or crickets can be provided as treats. We recommend that hedgehogs should be supplemented with calcium. Insects should be dusted or gut loaded with calcium vitamin powder. These non-commercially prepared foods can be hidden in the bedding to promote entertainment, exercise, and natural foraging behaviors. Hedgehogs should be fed around dusk, and uneaten food should be removed in the morning to prevent consumption of spoiled food. Foods that should be avoided include any raw meat or eggs, milk, nuts, seeds, large food, and hard food.

- Hedgehogs may be wary of new foods. New foods should be introduced slowly. It may be necessary to expose them to new foods for several days (replaced daily) before they will consider eating the food.
- Clean water should be provided at all times. Both a sipper bottle and a ceramic or glass dish should be provided. The dish should be sufficiently deep and heavy to prevent spillage and tipping. The dish should not be so large that the hedgehog can fall in. Once it is certain that the hedgehog is drinking well from the sipper bottle, the water dish can be removed.

Handling

Most hedgehogs are not particularly cuddly, but you can work with your pet to help it to be comfortable in your hands. The best time of day to work with a shy hedgehog is the evening, when it is least sleepy (and grumpy). Handle your pet gently by cradling it around its sides. A shy hedgehog is likely to curl into a ball initially, but give it a few minutes, and your pet will unroll and begin to explore its surroundings. Feeding treats can help your hedgehog associate handling with good things!

Behavior

- The spines are a hedgehog's greatest defense mechanism. When threatened, hedgehogs curl up in a tight ball, causing their spines to protrude outward. Because of this adaptation, they have very few predators. The spines also provide a great cushion from falls. They do not stick into predators the way quills do. However, they are firmly rooted in the skin and do not come out easily unless the hedgehog has mites or has some other illness that affects the skin.
- Hedgehogs are nocturnal creatures. They spend most of their evenings looking for food. In the wild, hedgehogs will travel several miles to hunt for invertebrates. During the day, they will remain hidden in burrows or cavities. It is important to provide hiding areas for your pet hedgehog. Although hedgehogs are nocturnal, they can be encouraged to be active during the day by later and later feedings.
- Hedgehogs practice a behavior known as "anointing." When a hedgehog comes into contact with a novel scent, it will lick and bite at the source of the scent and create frothy saliva with the new scent. This froth is then spread on the spines. The reason for this behavior is unknown, but it is not abnormal.

Lifespan

Hedgehogs typically live 5 to 10 years in captivity.

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Common Medical Conditions

- Because of their spiny projections, nocturnal lifestyle, and stoic nature, hedgehog illness may go unnoticed. Hedgehogs should have a general physical exam at least once per year, and ideally twice per year. Any subtle changes in behavior, appetite, drinking, defecation, and urination may signal illness. Monitoring of weight weekly with a gram scale could help veterinarians and owners detect signs of illness. A sudden change in weight, especially a weight loss of 10% or greater, should prompt an immediate visit to the veterinarian. Cancers are very common in hedgehogs.
- It is not necessary to neuter male hedgehogs unless there is a medical reason. Female hedgehogs are prone to uterine cancer, so spaying is recommended.
- Obesity can be a problem in hedgehogs, so it is important to avoid overfeeding your pet.
- As discussed earlier, hedgehogs are capable of entering a hibernation-like state in exceedingly cold or hot temperatures. However, this is a behavior that we do not encourage in pet hedgehogs. It is particularly dangerous in sick and young animals; the hedgehog's immune system is suppressed during this time, and this behavior may result in more severe illness or even death.
- Infestation with skin mites, fleas, and ticks is common in hedgehogs. You might notice that your pet is more restless, itchy, or scratching/biting at itself. Your veterinarian can provide you with ivermectin or a pyrethrin-based shampoo to treat this problem.

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