



## The Hedgehog Welfare Society presents *Caring for Your Hedgehog: A Basic Guide*

Even as hedgehogs gain in popularity as pets, there is a surprising lack of information about their proper care. The Hedgehog Welfare Society hopes to help you have a better relationship with your happy, healthy hedgehog. This basic care guide is meant as a starting point only; we have additional resources and advice for you online at [www.hedgies.com](http://www.hedgies.com). Please consult a vet before implementing any changes recommended by the Hedgehog Welfare Society ( [www.hedgehogwelfare.org](http://www.hedgehogwelfare.org) ) or Hedgies.com.

### **Is a hedgehog right for you?**

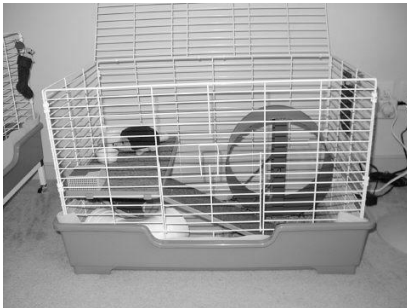
Before you take on the responsibility of a pet, you need to consider if a hedgehog is right for you. Bear in mind that hedgehogs are primarily nocturnal animals and can take a long time to become accustomed to being handled. A hedgehog owner should be patient, gentle, and willing to accept that their hedgehog may not keep the same hours as they do.

We strongly recommend that a child should not be the primary caregiver of a hedgehog. If you as a parent decide that your young child or adolescent can have a hedgehog, please know that you are responsible for the care and attention that the hedgehog receives. In other words -- the hedgehog ultimately belongs to *you*, not your child or teenager, and you need to be prepared to assume full responsibility for the life of a small creature if or when your child loses interest in their new pet.

Your hedgehog may live up to five or six years with a good diet and plenty of exercise. Having this naturally shy animal grow to trust you can be a very rewarding experience and one that makes having a hedgehog in your life worthwhile.

### **Home sweet home**

The first thing any new hedgehog owner will need is a habitat for their pet. We suggest an absolute *minimum* of a 24"x24"



cage, or the equivalent square footage. Always provide the largest possible living space for your hedgehog that your space and budget will allow. In the wild, a hedgehog can cover a territory of a couple of square miles hunting for food nightly, so exercise is a definite factor in choosing the habitat. Multi-level ferret cages or rabbit cages can make a good home for a hedgehog; just be sure to line any mesh floors with commercial carpeting or cut-to-fit vellux blankets to avoid foot injuries.

Hedgehogs are great climbers and can handle ramps placed at moderate angles to provide vertical room as well. Remember, though, that these terrific climbers can also climb out of many cages, so make sure that you have a lid or cover until you are familiar with your particular hedgehog's skill level.

### **Accessories for the Home**

Supplying an exercise wheel is a must for these active animals. Be sure to line any mesh- or bar-lined wheel with craft foam or a similar substance so that the hedgehog's feet do not slip between the bars and become injured, or simply use a solid-floored wheel. Hedgehogs are larger than hamsters, so make sure you choose an appropriately sized wheel with a diameter of 10" or more. See Hedgies.com's Shopping Guide for some recommended wheels for your hedgehog. In addition, many hedgehogs will use and enjoy a large-size exercise ball. Again, a diameter of 10" or larger will ensure that your pet has enough room to move about comfortably.

Your hedgehog, as a nocturnal animal, will probably spend most of the day asleep. Provide a place where your pet can feel secure, such as a nest box (even a cardboard one!) or a sleeping bag.

Although hedgehogs can often be taught to use a litter box, most owners choose to use some variety of bedding in their habitat. We recommend aspen shavings or recycled newsprint cat litter. Do not use cedar or colored bedding for your pet! The aromatic oils in cedar have been known to cause respiratory distress and may prove fatal. When you introduce any new loose litter to your hedgehog, keep an eye on him to ensure that he is not eating it. They can develop bowel impactions from eating litter. Another popular option is to line the hedgehog habitat with a cut-to-fit vellux blanket and to add a litter box with shavings inside.



### **Litter Training**

Hedgehogs can frequently be taught to use a litter box if training is begun young enough. Begin by selecting a litter box, which can be any container that the hedgehog can easily climb into and that is large enough for him to turn around in. Corner ferret litter boxes, available at most pet stores, work very well. Fill the litter box with some sort of litter such as pine or aspen

shavings or recycled newsprint cat litter. Avoid cedar as the aromatic oils can cause respiratory problems and also avoid clumping type cat litter as they may clump on or in the hedgehog's genitals. Once you have your litter box set up, "seed" it with a few poops. If your hedgehog misses the litter box, move the refuse into the litter box. Most hedgehogs prefer to use a litter box rather than to soil their homes, although many will also use their wheel as a second litter box. If your hedgehog does this, you might also place a small pan containing litter under the base of the wheel, or just clean the wheel frequently.

### **Diet plays an important role**

Serious consideration should be given to proper diet for hedgehog, since they are prone to a variety of diet-related illnesses, usually related to an excess of fat in the diet. Unfortunately, some products labeled as "hedgehog food" are not nutritionally sound. An EXCELLENT website with nutritional information can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/ptoe>

Make sure that whatever food you choose to offer your pet is low in fat and iron and high in protein. Low-fat or "light" cat foods are preferable to a high-fat hedgehog food. There are a variety of quality hedgehog food products available on the Internet or through mail-order. 1-2 tablespoonfuls daily of this staple food may be supplemented with treats, including 1-2 canned or fresh mealworms and crickets, lean cooked chicken, salmon, or tuna, boiled egg whites, rice cooked in broth, fruits and veggies, or commercially available hedgehog treats. Avoid treats or staple foods containing whole or large pieces of nuts or dried fruits as they can cause dental problems or choking. Changes in eating habits may signal health problems, so monitor your pet's intake (and output!) regularly. See Hedgies.com's Shopping Guide for some choices of staple foods.

Hedgehogs may be resistant to sudden changes in diet. Even if you want to stop feeding a particular food to your pet, you will probably want to do it gradually, mixing a little more of the new food each day until the old food is completely gone. Starting your hedgehog off by feeding a mixture of foods can help them avoid finicky eating in their later years.

### **Hedgehog Health Care**

Hedgehogs have special health care needs, but caring for them can be surprisingly straightforward if you are prepared. Most common hedgehog ailments such as obesity, quill loss, tattered ears, and foot injuries can be prevented through proper diet, exercise, and routine care.



Some ailments or symptoms necessitate veterinary care. *Before* the need arises, identify a veterinarian in your area who has experience with hedgehogs. A yearly well-pet visit consisting of a normal physical exam, fecal analysis, skin scraping for mites, and dental exam is an excellent precaution. A good vet can catch many symptoms before they become emergencies.

Since hedgehogs are relatively new to the domestic market, information on their proper care is rapidly changing. We strongly recommend joining one of the Internet hedgehog mailing lists, listed on Hedgies.com, which are excellent resources to share hedgehog symptoms and knowledge with others.

Keeping your hedgehog warm is also important. Since they come from an arid, hot climate, they are not used to cooler temperatures. Keep their habitat away from drafts and above 75°F. African hedgehogs cannot adequately hibernate, and attempts to do so are life-threatening. For a chart of common symptoms affecting hedgehogs, see Hedgies.com's Health Care page.

### **Socializing your hedgehog**

Hedgehogs are naturally shy, cautious, and nocturnal animals but have the capacity to socialize well with proper attention and patience on the part of the new owner. Offer your hedgehog a worn t-shirt upon arriving home, making sure all loose strings have been removed as they can wrap around wee legs and cause injury. This will allow your hedgehog to become familiar with your scent. Try holding your new friend in your lap during the evening while reading or watching TV. Often he will begin exploring and allow petting and other interaction. Also consider offering a treat of some kind like a mealworm or a piece of lean cooked chicken upon waking your hedgehog to provide a positive reinforcement. Having your hedgehog habitat in a moderately trafficked area of your home is a good idea as it allows your new friend to become accustomed to the everyday sounds of humans.

The key to socializing a hedgehog is patience. Remember that the huffing and rolling into a ball is out of nervousness or fear and not anger. You are unfamiliar and unknown until you have proven yourself a friend. Once this beautiful relationship has been established, the bond is genuinely affectionate and meaningful on both sides.

### **The Hedgehog Welfare Society**

[www.hedgehogwelfare.org](http://www.hedgehogwelfare.org)

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