GENERAL

information on hedgehogs as pets

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Information on Hedgehogs as Pets: A Complete Guide for New and Experienced Owners

Hedgehogs have become increasingly popular as exotic companions, offering a unique blend of cuteness, low maintenance, and intriguing nocturnal behavior. If you're curious about **information on hedgehogs as pets**, this guide will walk you through every aspect—from choosing the right species to providing a safe, healthy environment. Whether you're a first time hedgehog owner or simply looking to refresh your knowledge, you'll find practical tips, expert insights, and common pitfalls to avoid.

What Is a Hedgehog? A Quick Overview

Hedgehogs belong to the family Erinaceidae and are small, spiny mammals native to Europe, Asia, and Africa. The most commonly kept species in captivity is the **European hedgehog (Erinaceus europaeus)**, but other species such as the African pygmy hedgehog (Atelerix albiventris) and the long tailed hedgehog (Hemiechinus auritus) are also popular.

Key traits that make hedgehogs appealing as pets include:

- Compact size (usually 10–14 inches long)
- Low grooming needs (self shaving, minimal brushing)
- Night active lifestyle (ideal for indoor living)
- Relatively short lifespan (3–7 years)

Why Choose a Hedgehog as a Pet?

Many people are drawn to hedgehogs because they combine the charm of a small mammal with the independence of a low maintenance animal. Here are a few reasons why hedgehogs can be a rewarding addition to your household:

1. Quiet and Low Impact – Hedgehogs are naturally quiet, making them suitable for apartments or shared living spaces.
2. Minimal Space Requirements – A well equipped cage and a few enrichment items can provide a stimulating environment.
3. Unique Behavior – Watching a hedgehog forage, explore, or curl into its quill can be a fascinating experience.
4. Short Lifespan, Long Bond – Their shorter life expectancy means you can form a deep bond in a relatively short period.

Choosing the Right Hedgehog Species for You

Before you adopt a hedgehog, consider the species that best matches your lifestyle. Below are the most common pet hedgehog species and what you should know about each:

European Hedgehog (Erinaceus europaeus)

These are the most widely kept in the United States. They grow to about 12–14 inches in length and have a

lifespan of 3–7 years. European hedgehogs are relatively docile when handled gently and can be trained to come when called.

African Pygmy Hedgehog (Atelerix albiventris)

A smaller species, pygmy hedgehogs reach about 8–9 inches. They are more agile and can be more active during the day, but they also enjoy the night. Their lifespan is slightly shorter, typically 2–4 years.

Long Tailed Hedgehog (Hemiechinus auritus)

Long tailed hedgehogs are larger, up to 14–16 inches, and have a distinct tail. They require a more spacious enclosure and are less commonly kept in captivity due to their specific habitat needs.

When choosing a species, consider:

- Availability – Some species are harder to find or have stricter legal restrictions.
- Temperament – European hedgehogs are generally more tolerant of handling.
- Space and Budget – Larger species need bigger cages and more enrichment.

Legal Considerations and Licensing

Before adopting a hedgehog, check your local regulations. In many U.S. states, hedgehogs are considered exotic pets and may require a special license or permit. Some countries outright ban the ownership of hedgehogs. Always source your pet from reputable breeders or rescue organizations that adhere to humane standards.

Housing Your Hedgehog: The Ideal Enclosure

A hedgehog's enclosure is the foundation of its health and happiness. A well designed cage provides safety, enrichment, and temperature control.

Cage Size

Minimum recommended dimensions for a European hedgehog are 20 /× /12 /× /10 inches (length /× /width /× /height). For a pygmy hedgehog, a smaller cage can suffice, but you should still provide at least 18 × 10 × 10 inches. These sizes allow for adequate climbing, digging, and exploration.

Material and Construction

- Wire cages – Provide ventilation but must have a solid bottom to prevent injuries.
- Plastic or glass aquariums – Offer a secure, easy to clean environment but may lack ventilation.
- DIY terrariums – Custom cages can incorporate natural substrates and enrichment.

Flooring

Use bedding that is safe, absorbent, and non irritating. Options include:

- Paper bedding (e.g., paper towels, shredded paper)
- Wood shavings (avoid cedar or pine, which can be toxic)
- Coconut fiber or hemp

Temperature and Humidity

Maintain a stable temperature between 72–78°F (22–26°C). Hedgehogs are sensitive to drafts and sudden temperature changes. Use a thermometer to monitor conditions and a small, low heat lamp if necessary.

Enrichment Items

Hedgehogs are curious and enjoy mental stimulation. Include:

- Hanging tunnels or tubes for exploration
- Rotating wheels (small enough to avoid injury)
- Naturalistic decorations (e.g., faux rocks, branches)
- Hidden food puzzles to encourage foraging

Feeding Your Hedgehog: A Balanced Diet

Providing a nutritious, balanced diet is essential for a hedgehog's health. Hedgehogs are insectivores, but a varied diet ensures they receive all necessary nutrients.

Main Food Sources

- Commercial hedgehog pellets – These are formulated to meet all dietary needs.
- Live insects (mealworms, crickets, waxworms) – Offer protein and moisture.
- Cooked eggs – Good source of protein; avoid raw eggs to prevent salmonella.
- Vegetables (cooked carrots, peas, spinach) – Provide vitamins and fiber.

Feeding Schedule

Feed your hedgehog once or twice daily, preferably in the evening when they are naturally active. Offer a small portion of protein and supplement with vegetables. Avoid overfeeding, which can lead to obesity.

Water

Provide fresh water in a shallow, wide dish to prevent drowning. Change water daily and consider adding a water bottle for consistent access.

Health Care and Regular Check Ups

Regular veterinary care helps catch issues early and ensures a long, healthy life.

Common Health Issues

- Obesity – Often due to overfeeding or lack of exercise.
- Dental problems – Misaligned teeth can affect eating.
- Respiratory infections – Symptoms include wheezing, sneezing.
- Parasites – Fleas, mites, and internal parasites can be common.

Veterinary Visits

Schedule an annual check up with a vet experienced in exotic pets. Bring your hedgehog's medical history, including any recent changes in behavior or appetite.

Preventive Care

- Regular cleaning of the cage to reduce bacterial buildup.
- Routine inspection for skin lesions or injuries.
- Vaccinations are not standard for hedgehogs, but some owners opt for rabies or distemper shots if recommended by a vet.

Behavioral Insights and Training Tips

Hedgehogs are naturally shy and may take time to trust their owners. However, with patience and gentle handling, they can become affectionate companions.

Handling and Bonding

- Start with short, calm sessions to avoid startling your hedgehog.
- Hold your hedgehog gently, supporting its hind legs to prevent injury.
- Use treats (e.g., small insects or fruit) to build positive associations.

Training Basics

Although hedgehogs aren't as trainable as dogs, they can learn simple cues:

- Come when called – Use a consistent name or cue word.
- Use a litter box – Place a shallow litter box with fine, non scented material.
- Accept grooming – Introduce a soft brush gradually.

Common Myths Debunked

- "Hedgehogs are always shy." – While they may be cautious, many hedgehogs enjoy interaction once they feel secure.
- "They can be left alone for days." – Hedgehogs need daily interaction and enrichment to prevent boredom.
- "They don't need a litter box." – Providing a litter box helps keep the cage clean and reduces odor.

Grooming and Hygiene

Hedgehogs are self cleaning creatures, but owners should still perform routine grooming tasks.

Quill Care

Unlike spines, hedgehog quills can shed, especially during molting seasons (spring and fall). Gently brush with a soft, wide bristle brush to remove loose quills and prevent matting.

Bathing

Bathing is rarely necessary, but if your hedgehog gets dirty or has a skin condition, use a mild, hypoallergenic pet shampoo. Keep baths short and warm, and dry thoroughly afterward.

Litter Box Maintenance

Change the litter regularly (at least once a week) and disinfect the box to prevent bacterial growth.

Safety Tips: Keeping Your Hedgehog and Home Safe

- Remove small objects that could be swallowed (e.g., coins, buttons).
- Secure cords and wires to prevent chewing.
- Keep the cage away from drafty windows or vents.
- Use a safety lock on the cage to prevent accidental escape.

FAQs About Hedgehogs as Pets

Can Hedgehogs Live with Cats or Dogs?

It's best to keep hedgehogs separate from other pets. Their spines can be a hazard to cats, and dogs may inadvertently crush or harm them.

How Long Do Hedgehogs Live?

European hedgehogs typically live 3–7 years, while pygmy hedgehogs may live 2–4 years.

Are Hedgehogs Good for Children?

Hedgehogs can be gentle, but children should learn how to handle them carefully. Supervision is essential to

prevent accidental injuries.

What Should I Do If My Hedgehog Is Sick?

Observe for changes in appetite, activity, or breathing. If you notice any abnormal signs, contact a vet immediately.

Conclusion: Making the Most of Your Hedgehog Companion

Owning a hedgehog can be a delightful experience that offers a blend of quiet companionship and intriguing nocturnal behavior. By choosing the right species, providing a proper environment, feeding a balanced diet, and maintaining regular health care, you'll create a safe, happy home for your new friend.

Remember that hedgehogs are

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