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*This handout is intended to provide only very general guidelines. Consult with your veterinarian about other aspects of advanced care that can be considered to ensure adequate health.*

## General Information

The African pygmy hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*), also known as the 4-toed or white-bellied hedgehog, originates from central Africa. Hedgehogs are crepuscular creatures (active at dawn and dusk), which means that they spend much of their daytime hours sleeping. They have characteristic small quills or spines that cover their head and back. When scared they scrunch up into a tight ball with their quills erect, while making a hissing noise to scare off predators. There are over 5,000 spines on the hedgehog. Young hedgehogs will shed their spines starting at about 2 to 6 months of age. During this period of shedding, your hedgehog may hiss, roll into a ball for long periods of time, or exhibit a poor appetite. It is acceptable to handle your hedgehog during shedding, just be careful and patient. Shedding usually takes about a month, and afterwards your hedgehog will return to normal behavior.

## Lifespan

The average lifespan of a hedgehog is 5-7 years.

## Housing

Hedgehogs need a solid bottom cage at least three feet long and two feet wide with plenty of ventilation. Aquarium style cages are not appropriate due to poor ventilation. Carefresh (recycled shredded paper) or layers of fleece bedding are preferred to use at the bottom of the cage. Hides should be provided for your hedgehog to sleep in. Towels, blankets, or anything with small threads can get caught around your pets' legs and constrict the blood supply to the foot so these should not be used. Human hairs can also cause this effect so care should be taken to check their legs and toes regularly. Ceramic water bowls or water bottles attached to the side of the cage can be used to provide fresh water. Exercise wheels may be used to encourage exercise. Exercise balls are popular but should be used with caution around stairs or other pets.

Hedgehogs are sensitive to low temperatures so a heat source such as a heat lamp or heating pad may need to be provided to keep a part of the cage at least **80°F**. Below 70°F may induce hibernation, which can lead to lethargy, not eating, illness and even death.

"Anting" is a normal behavior performed when a hedgehog is confronted by a new object or smell in its environment. The hedgehog will lick the new object repeatedly until it begins to drool and then groom its skin and spines with frothy saliva. This behavior may last for a few minutes or even for up to an hour.

## Diet

The natural diet of hedgehogs out in the wild is difficult to duplicate as they are insectivorous omnivores. There are commercial hedgehog foods available, however they may not be a truly complete formulation since little research has been done into their diet. Chicken (or other meat) based cat food (dry kibble) that is high in protein is a reasonable alternative. Live mealworms and crickets are an excellent supplement to the diet and provide enrichment.

## Common Medical Conditions

### Wobbly hedgehog syndrome

- Caused by a degenerative myelopathy of the spine
- Hedgehogs will have a wobbly gait, that can lead to paralysis and even death
- Prognosis is guarded to poor, as there is no known treatment

### Obesity

- Hedgehogs can become spoiled when given mealworms, and may refuse to eat anything else
- Mealworms by themselves do not constitute a full diet and are very high in fat- we recommend no more than 10 mealworms 2-3 times a week.

### Skin issues

- Ringworm and other fungal infections are somewhat common
- Ectoparasites such as mites can appear as missing quills

### Cancer

- Unfortunately, cancers are very common, and it is suspected that there is a genetic component to certain cancers in hedgehogs
- Commonly affected areas are the jaw, skin, eyes, and internal organs

## References

*Animal Hospital in Centennial, CO.* Aurora Animal Hospital. (n.d.). <https://www.auroraanimalhospital.com/>

*For Exotic Animal Veterinary Medicine Professionals.* LafeberVet. (2025, April 25). <https://lafeber.com/vet/>

