

African Pygmy Hedgehog

Care Guide for New Owners

Hedgehog

Exotic Pet

Beginner-Friendly

Nocturnal

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Atelerix albiventris
Lifespan	3 to 7 years (average 4 to 5)
Adult Size	6 to 9 inches, 8 to 24 oz
Activity Cycle	Nocturnal (active at night)
Temperament	Solitary, curious, can be shy at first
Min. Housing	2 sq ft of floor space (more is always better)
Temperature	72 to 80 degrees F required at all times
Diet	Insectivore / omnivore
Grooming	Low maintenance; monthly baths, weekly foot soaks
Zoonotic Risk	Can carry Salmonella; wash hands after every interaction
Good for Kids?	Supervised interactions only; not a hands-on pet for young children

Meet the African Pygmy Hedgehog

If you have never had a hedgehog before, get ready for one of the most surprisingly wonderful animals you will ever meet. African pygmy hedgehogs are small, spiky, and full of personality. They can be shy when you first bring them home, but with patience and consistency they become incredibly fun little companions. They are clean, relatively quiet, and endlessly entertaining to watch once they feel comfortable in their space.

That said, they are a commitment that deserves real thought. Hedgehogs have specific habitat, temperature, and diet needs that are non-negotiable. They are also nocturnal, which means they sleep most of the day and come alive at night. If you are patient, curious, and willing to learn their language, they will absolutely win your heart.

Where They Come From

African pygmy hedgehogs are native to central and eastern Africa, where they live across a wide range of habitats including savannas, grasslands, and scrublands. In the wild, they are opportunistic foragers, covering large distances each night in search of insects, worms, small invertebrates, and occasionally plant matter.

The African pygmy hedgehog kept as a pet today is actually a hybrid, primarily bred from *Atelerix albiventris* (the four-toed hedgehog) and *Atelerix algirus* (the Algerian hedgehog). Captive breeding programs in the United States took off in the 1980s and 1990s. They have been bred in captivity for several decades, so while they are not domesticated the way dogs or cats are, they are far more accustomed to human interaction than their wild counterparts.

Interesting Wild Behavior

Hedgehogs self-anoint when they encounter a new or strong scent, licking the source and spreading the foamy saliva onto their quills with their tongue. If you see your hedgehog doing this, do not be alarmed. It is completely normal and one of the most uniquely strange things they do.

Housing and Habitat

Housing is one of the most important pieces of hedgehog ownership to get right from the start. The enclosure needs to be the right size, the right material, and fully set up before your hedgehog ever comes home.

Enclosure Size

The absolute minimum floor space is 2 square feet, but bigger is always better. Many experienced keepers aim for 4 square feet or more. Hedgehogs are natural runners and can cover several miles in a single night given the opportunity, so cramped housing leads to stress and boredom.

Recommended Enclosure Types

C&C; Grids with Coroplast (for adults)

C&C; (Cubes and Coroplast) enclosures are a popular choice when built correctly. You construct the wire grid walls and line the bottom with a solid coroplast tray. They are customizable, easy to clean, and can be expanded as needed. However, there are two important caveats. First, the wire/grid panels are not appropriate for juvenile hedgehogs, as young hedgehogs can get their heads stuck in the holes. For juveniles, use only solid coroplast panels for all walls until the hedgehog is fully grown. Second, some bold hedgehogs are skilled climbers and will scale the grid walls. Even with a lid, hedgehogs have been known to climb and then drop, which puts them at risk for injury. If your hedgehog is a climber, opt for a smooth-sided enclosure instead.

Large Smooth-Sided Storage Totes

A large, smooth-sided storage tote (at least 100 quart) works very well for hedgehogs, especially for new owners on a budget. The smooth sides prevent climbing and escaping, and they are easy to clean. The main drawback is ventilation. Cut out a large portion of the lid and replace it with hardware cloth secured tightly to ensure adequate airflow. Poor ventilation leads to humidity buildup, respiratory issues, and mold in bedding.

Larger Mammal Enclosures

Some owners opt for larger mammal enclosures such as rabbit hutches or extra-large guinea pig cages. These can work well if the bar spacing is appropriate (close enough that your hedgehog cannot squeeze through or get their head stuck) and the bottom is solid. Always check for wire flooring before using any pre-made enclosure.

What to Avoid

Wire-bottomed cages: Their feet and legs can fall through the gaps, causing injuries and broken toes. Always cover wire floors completely with a solid surface.

Aquariums: Glass traps heat and has very poor ventilation, which can cause respiratory problems and dangerous temperature spikes. If an aquarium is the only option, use a screen top and monitor temperature closely.

Any enclosure where your hedgehog can climb and fall: A drop from height is a serious injury risk.

Temperature: Non-Negotiable

Temperature control is one of the most critical aspects of hedgehog care. African pygmy hedgehogs must be kept between 72 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit at all times. They are extremely sensitive to cold, and temperatures below 65 degrees F can trigger a dangerous state called torpor.

Warning: Torpor Can Be Fatal

Hedgehogs are not true hibernators. Unlike European hedgehogs, African pygmy hedgehogs are not physically equipped to survive hibernation. If a hedgehog goes into torpor, it is a medical emergency. Signs include extreme lethargy, feeling cold to the touch, unresponsiveness, and curling into a tight ball without movement. Warm them slowly by holding them against your body and contact a vet immediately.

A ceramic heat emitter (CHE) mounted on a thermostat is the most reliable way to maintain ambient temperature. Avoid heat rocks, under-tank heaters, and heat lamps with visible light, as these can cause burns or disrupt sleep cycles. An Inkbird or similar thermostat paired with a CHE gives you consistent, safe temperature control.

Lighting

Hedgehogs do well with a consistent light cycle of 12 to 14 hours of light per day. A predictable light schedule helps regulate their internal clock and supports healthy behavior patterns. Room lighting on a timer works perfectly well. No special UV or reptile-style bulbs are needed.

Bedding

The right bedding keeps your hedgehog comfortable, helps control odor, and makes cleaning much easier. The most important rules are no dust, no artificial fragrances, and no loose fibers that can wrap around tiny feet.

Recommended Bedding Options

Fleece liners are the top choice for most hedgehog owners and for good reason. They are washable, reusable, soft on feet, and because they go through a hot wash regularly, mites are not able to survive and establish themselves the way they can in other bedding types. If you use fleece, inspect it regularly for loose threads or fraying edges. A loose thread can wrap around a toe and cut off circulation, which is called a ring injury or toe tourniquet. Trim any fraying immediately.

Paper-based beddings like Carefresh are a solid second choice, especially for hedgehogs who love to burrow. Aspen shavings (dust-free grade only) are also an acceptable option. For both paper bedding and aspen, freeze the bedding for a full 48 hours before use. This kills any mites that may be present in the packaging before they ever have a chance to reach your hedgehog.

Bedding to Avoid

Cedar shavings: Cedar contains aromatic oils that are toxic to small animals and damage the respiratory tract.

Raw pine shavings: Similar to cedar, raw pine contains phenols that are harmful. Kiln-dried pine is safer but still not the best choice.

Cat litter of any kind: Too dusty, causes respiratory damage, and can cause intestinal blockage if ingested.

Corn cob bedding: Molds quickly and causes fatal impaction if ingested.

Scented beddings of any kind: Fragrances are highly irritating to hedgehog respiratory systems.

Diet and Nutrition

Hedgehogs are insectivores by nature, meaning the foundation of their diet should be protein from insects. In practice, most owners use a combination of high-quality dry kibble and live or dried insects as the primary feeding approach.

Dry Kibble: The Staple

A high-quality, low-fat dry cat food or specifically formulated hedgehog kibble should make up the base of the diet. Look for foods where a named meat (chicken, turkey, salmon) is the first ingredient. Aim for protein content of 28 to 35 percent and fat content of 10 to 15 percent. Avoid foods with corn, wheat, or soy as primary ingredients.

Avoid hedgehog foods sold at large pet chain stores as your primary food. Many of these products contain dried fruit, seeds, and lower-quality protein sources. A quality cat kibble such as Blue Buffalo Wilderness, Purina Pro Plan, or Royal Canin is a far better option.

Insects: The Protein Boost

Insects should be a regular part of your hedgehog's diet, and most hedgehogs go absolutely wild for them. Mealworms, dubia roaches, and crickets are all popular options. Mealworms are the easiest and most widely available. Waxworms are very high in fat, so think of them as an occasional treat rather than a staple. Crickets provide great protein but can be messy to handle.

Live insects provide enrichment in addition to nutrition since hunting is a natural behavior. Dried insects are a fine alternative if live bugs are not your thing. Aim for insects a few times per week rather than daily, to keep fat content balanced. Never feed wild-caught insects, as they may carry pesticides or parasites.

Safe Treats

Safe Additions

- Cooked plain chicken or turkey (unseasoned)
- Scrambled egg (no butter or seasoning)
- Mealworms, dubia roaches, crickets
- Waxworms (sparingly, high fat)

Never Feed These

- Grapes or raisins (toxic)
- Avocado (toxic)
- Citrus fruits (too acidic)
- Dried fruit or seeds (choking hazard)
- Dairy products (lactose intolerant)
- Anything spiced or seasoned
- Wild-caught insects

Feeding Schedule

Feed your hedgehog once a day in the evening, right around or after sunset. Since they are nocturnal, this aligns with when they naturally want to eat. Remove any uneaten food the next morning. Fresh

water should be available at all times. A water bottle is preferred over a dish to prevent a wet belly from spills. Clean the bottle or dish and change the water daily.

A Note on Obesity

Hedgehogs are prone to obesity, especially when exercise is limited. A hedgehog should have a defined waist when viewed from above, and you should be able to feel but not see the hip bones. An overweight hedgehog has fat rolls that prevent it from fully curling into a ball. Weigh your hedgehog weekly and adjust food and treats if weight is trending up.

Sleep Cycle

This is one of the most important things to understand before bringing a hedgehog home, because it shapes everything about how you interact with them.

Hedgehogs are nocturnal. They sleep most of the day, typically 12 to 16 hours, and become active in the evenings and overnight. During the day, your hedgehog may be completely unresponsive, huddled in their hide, and totally uninterested in interacting with you. This is completely normal.

Waking a hedgehog during their sleep cycle causes real stress. Over time, chronic sleep disruption weakens the immune system and can contribute to illness. Schedule handling sessions for the evening hours when your hedgehog is naturally starting to wake up on their own.

Exercise and the Wheel

An exercise wheel is not optional. Hedgehogs are built to run and can cover 5 to 8 miles in a single night in the wild. In captivity, the wheel is how they meet that need. A hedgehog without a wheel is a bored, frustrated, and often obese hedgehog.

Choosing the Right Wheel

The wheel must have a solid running surface and a diameter of at least 10 to 12 inches. Smaller wheels force the hedgehog to run with an arched back, which causes spinal injury over time. The Carolina Storm Bucket Wheel and Wodent Wheel are two widely recommended options.

Wire or mesh wheels: The open surface catches and cuts their sensitive feet. Never use a wire wheel.

Wheels with spokes or cutouts in the running surface: Hedgehogs urinate and defecate while running (this is normal). A running surface with holes or gaps traps urine against their feet, which causes urine scald. Always choose a fully solid, smooth running surface that is easy to wipe clean.

Small diameter wheels (under 10 inches): Force an arched spine and cause injury over time.

Plan to wipe the wheel down daily. A dirty wheel is a bacterial breeding ground and a direct source of foot problems and respiratory irritation.

Enrichment and Mental Stimulation

Hedgehogs are smarter than they look, and a hedgehog with nothing to do becomes a stressed and unhealthy one. Enrichment does not need to be complicated or expensive, but it does need to be consistent.

In-Enclosure

- Exercise wheel (solid surface, 10 to 12 inch minimum)
- Tunnels and hideouts to explore
- Small cardboard boxes with holes cut out
- Paper bags or cups for investigating
- Treat puzzles or scatter feeding with kibble

Interactive

- Supervised floor time outside the enclosure
- New smells and textures introduced gradually
- Bonding time with you during active evening hours
- Safe outdoor grass exploration (no pesticides, fully supervised)

Floor time outside the enclosure gives your hedgehog new sensory experiences and is a great bonding opportunity. Create a fully enclosed area free of gaps they can squeeze through, cords they can chew, and anything small enough to swallow. Supervise every second.

Handling and Interaction

New hedgehogs are often defensive. When they feel threatened, they huff, click, and curl into a tight spiky ball. This is their primary defense mechanism. A hedgehog that huffs constantly is a stressed or untrusting hedgehog. With patience and consistency, most hedgehogs settle down and begin to tolerate and even enjoy gentle handling.

Building Trust

Start by placing a worn t-shirt or cloth in the enclosure so your hedgehog gets used to your scent while you are not there. When handling, scoop from underneath rather than grabbing from above. Overhead grabbing mimics a predator attack. Keep early sessions short, around 5 to 10 minutes, and gradually increase time as your hedgehog becomes more comfortable. Some hedgehogs warm up in a few weeks. Others take months. Never force interaction, and never punish huffing.

Safe Handling Tips

- Always wash your hands before and after handling to reduce Salmonella risk.
- Scoop gently from underneath, supporting the full body.
- Let them sniff your hand first if they are in a defensive position.
- Hold sessions during evening hours when they are naturally awake.
- Avoid loud noises, sudden movements, and strong perfumes during handling.
- Let them walk from hand to hand rather than keeping them restrained in place.

- If they bite, a calm, sharp exhale is a good deterrent. Do not jerk your hand away, as this can cause injury to both of you.

Common Health Issues

Hedgehogs are hardy animals, but they are prone to certain health conditions that every owner should know. Annual vet check-ups with an exotic vet are strongly recommended. Find an exotic vet in your area before you need one.

Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome (WHS)

A progressive neurological disease with no known cure. Symptoms include wobbling in the back legs, loss of muscle control that progresses forward over time, and eventually paralysis. Onset is usually in younger adults between 1 and 3 years old. Management focuses on quality of life and comfort care.

Uterine Cancer

Very common in unspayed females, particularly after age 2. Signs include bloody discharge from the vulva, lethargy, weight loss, and loss of appetite. Spaying at a young age is protective but carries anesthetic risks given their small size. Discuss the pros and cons with your exotic vet.

Oral Cancer

Unfortunately common in hedgehogs. Signs include drooling, difficulty eating, facial swelling, pawing at the mouth, and unexplained weight loss. Any asymmetry around the mouth or jaw warrants an immediate vet visit. Caught early, some cases can be managed surgically.

Mites

Quill loss, dry flaky skin, and excessive scratching are the classic signs of a mite infestation. A vet can confirm with a skin scrape and prescribe treatment. Over-the-counter mite treatments designed for other animals are often unsafe for hedgehogs. Always get a diagnosis before treating.

Dental Disease

Hedgehogs are prone to tartar buildup, tooth decay, and gum disease. Signs include drooling, difficulty eating, pawing at the mouth, and weight loss. Annual dental checks with your exotic vet are worthwhile.

Obesity

A major issue in captive hedgehogs and a gateway to fatty liver disease, heart disease, and joint problems. See the diet and wheel sections. Weigh weekly and adjust as needed.

Respiratory Infections

Signs include wheezing, labored breathing, nasal discharge, and lethargy. Often caused by cold drafts, poor ventilation, or dusty bedding. Requires veterinary treatment.

Torpor / Attempted Hibernation

A cold-induced state that can be fatal if not caught quickly. See the temperature section. Always treat torpor as a medical emergency. Warm them slowly against your body and call your vet.

Salmonella

Hedgehogs can carry Salmonella without appearing ill. Always wash hands thoroughly after any handling, cleaning, or feeding. Keep hedgehogs away from food preparation areas and out of reach of young children and immunocompromised individuals.

Things Every New Owner Should Know

The first two weeks are the hardest.

Your new hedgehog is overwhelmed. They may refuse to come out, huff at everything, and seem completely uninterested in you. Give them space and keep your interactions short and calm. They need time to adjust to their new environment and your scent before they will trust you.

Find an exotic vet now, before there is an emergency.

Not every vet sees hedgehogs. Search for an exotic vet in your area before you bring your hedgehog home. Scrambling to find one at midnight when something is wrong is not a situation you want to be in.

Poop happens, and it happens constantly.

Hedgehogs often poop while running on their wheel, during handling, and sometimes just because. Many hedgehogs poop when they are nervous. Clean the wheel every day to prevent bacterial buildup and foot issues.

Juvenile quilling is normal and temporarily uncomfortable for them.

Young hedgehogs between 6 and 12 weeks go through quilling, where they shed their baby quills and grow in adult ones. It can look alarming and is clearly uncomfortable. Extra patience, warm baths, and a small amount of vitamin E oil rubbed gently on the skin can help during this period.

Weigh your hedgehog weekly.

A small kitchen scale is one of the most useful tools you can own. Weighing weekly catches illness early, since weight loss is often the very first sign that something is wrong before any other symptoms appear.

Bath and grooming basics.

Hedgehogs only need a bath about once a month unless they get noticeably dirty. Use a shallow amount of warm (never cold or hot) water in a sink or tub. The water should not go higher than their belly. Use a soft toothbrush to gently scrub their quills and feet, always brushing WITH the grain of the quills and never against it. Never attempt to bathe a hedgehog that is balled up. They need to be relaxed and willing to walk around before you introduce water. In addition to monthly baths, do a foot soak as needed, using just enough warm water to cover their feet. Regular foot soaks help prevent buildup of debris and urine that can cause foot irritation.

Over-bathing causes dry skin.

Bathing more than once a month strips the natural oils from their skin and causes dryness and flaking. Monthly is plenty for most hedgehogs.

The wheel is not a bonus feature.

An exercise wheel is an essential part of your hedgehog's enclosure. Set it up before they come home. A hedgehog without a wheel will be stressed, bored, and much more prone to obesity and behavioral issues.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions, connect you with resources, and support you throughout your hedgehog ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.