

# Caring for and Getting to Know Your New Hedgehog

## Is a hedgehog right for you?

If you're thinking about adding a new hedgehog to your family, you'll first want to consider whether he or she will fit your lifestyle and personality. Hedgehogs are an ancient species and have only been living with humans for a few years, so they still retain the majority of their natural instincts.

## Here are some things to consider before bringing your new hedgehog home:

Hedgehogs are primarily nocturnal animals. This means that, while they may accept a certain degree of interaction during the day, they will be most comfortable playing at night. While awake, they run on their wheels, eat, drink and move their furnishings around, and can be somewhat noisy. You will want to bear this in mind when you place your pet's habitat. Hedgehogs are also naturally shy, so it can take a long time for your new pet to become accustomed to you, and to being handled by you. You'll need to be patient, calm and gentle in order to reassure your pet that s/he is safe. Also, hedgehog bodies are covered in thousands of sharp quills. YOU WILL GET PRICKED at some point, because rolling up with erected quills has been your hedgehog's defense for millions of years. In the wild, your hedgehog would cover several miles every night in search of food, so you'll need to give your pet ample opportunity to exercise, or else obesity and boredom can become a problem. Since they are insectivores, the human caretaker will be responsible for paying close attention to diet, which should include feeder insects.

## POTTYING:

Just like humans, hedgehogs often have to use "the bathroom" shortly after waking up. It's therefore possible that s/he may eliminate on you at some point, especially during his babyhood and old age.

Your hedgehog will need his or her habitat cleaned daily and changed out approximately weekly, will need regular veterinary visits to stay healthy, and may or may not litter box train. Your pet may live up to five, six, or more years, so you'll need to be able to commit to an extended relationship with him or her. Your hedgehog will most likely not need a cage companion. Although some females enjoy the company of another female, males should NEVER be housed together. This may sound like a lot to remember, but the joy of making friends with these gentle, shy mammals cannot be equaled, and you will be rewarded for your patience and understanding.

## **A ROOM OF HIS OR HER OWN:**

The first thing you will need is a habitat for hedgie. For hedgehogs, the more space the better, but we recommend an absolute minimum of 2.5 square feet of floor space for each animal. As already mentioned, your hedgehog needs a lot of exercise each night while you're asleep. Large sterilite bins and multi-level ferret, rabbit or guinea pig cages can make a good home for a hedgehog, as well as more complex, home-made enclosures. You should be sure that the walls are high enough that hedgie cannot climb out, and be sure to line any mesh floors with coroplast, tile or another solid surface to avoid foot injuries. Some hedgehogs are great climbers and enjoy solid-floored ramps placed at moderate angles.

## **ACCESSORIES:**

Your hedgehog will need an exercise wheel to play on while you're sleeping. The best wheels for these creatures are at least 10" in diameter, and are made with solid floors. Wheels made from paint buckets (Bucket Wheels) or solid metal wheels are a very good option, but you can also line a wire wheel with craft foam or another solid substance. The important things are that your hedgehog's feet and toenails should not get trapped in the wheel, as injury can result, and that the wheel clean up easily. Your hedgie also needs shallow bowls for food, and either a water bowl or a water bottle.

Since your hedgehog is a nocturnal, burrowing animal, s/he will need a private place to sleep during the day. Provide a place where your pet can feel secure, such as a hidey box, a sleeping bag, or a pile of fleece blankets.

You'll also need some sort of bedding for your pet's home. Aspen or pine shavings, recycled newsprint cat litter, and fabric cage liners are commonly used. NEVER USE CEDAR as the aromatic oils have been known to cause respiratory problems, lesions, and even death. If you choose to use cage liners, make sure there are no loose threads that can wrap around hedgie's feet or legs, and if you chose another bedding, watch your hedgehog for a few days to make sure s/he is not eating it, as intestinal blockage can result.

## **PLAYTIME AND SOCIALIZATION:**

Your hedgehog needs you! In order to develop a loving bond with your new friend, you need to handle him or her daily. Hedgehogs are naturally somewhat shy and cautious, but they can socialize well with patience and daily interaction. Snuggle time is a good way to win your hedgehog's heart. While watching television or reading, you can hold your hedgie on your lap under a fleece blanket. This keeps your pet warm, and teaches him that you are a friend. Treats (like a meal worm, a wax worm, a bit of baked chicken, or a freeze-dried cricket) given by hand while your pet is on your lap will help build a positive bond. Talk to your hedgehog in quiet tones so that s/he becomes accustomed to your voice, and upon arriving home, offer your new hedgehog a worn t-shirt to sleep in. This will help your new pet associate your scent with security and comfort. Just make sure there are no loose strings on the shirt, as they can wrap around tiny legs. The key to winning your hedgehog's trust is patience. Huffing, rolling into a ball and popping are his or her normal reactions to fear. Your hedgehog

does not hate you if s/he does these things. It's just that you're a stranger—an unknown—and until you prove yourself otherwise, your pet might be frightened. Once you establish a relationship with your hedgehog, the bond is genuine on both sides.

Many hedgehogs love to explore, and once they are comfortable in their new homes they will enjoy free-ranging in a hedgehog-proofed room while you supervise. If you do not feel confident letting your pet roam free, you should invest in some safe toys for out-of-cage play like a large exercise ball or a play pen with hidey houses, cat or ferret balls, or logs to burrow underneath.

#### **LITTER TRAINING:**

Some hedgehogs can learn to use a litter box. Begin by choosing your hedgehog's 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, and which is resistant to moisture. Corner ferret litter boxes work very well. Add some sort of litter such as pine or aspen shavings or recycled newsprint cat litter to the box, but remember to avoid cedar (see above) and clumping type cat litters as these may clump on or in the hedgehog's genitals. Next, place a few stools in the box and reward your hedgehog for eliminating in the box. If your hedgehog makes a mistake, move the refuse into the litter box and NEVER EVER punish him or her. Not all hedgehogs will learn to use a box, even though they are clean animals and like to keep their waste away from living areas. If your hedgehog does not take to the litter box, you might place a small pan containing litter, or use folded paper towels under the base of his or her wheel and just clean the wheel daily.

#### **YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT:**

There is much debate as to what constitutes proper hedgehog nutrition. But there are certain things that most people agree on. First, unless there is a medical reason to feed something else, your hedgehog should eat a diet low in fat, low in iron, and moderately high in protein. And remember, while babies are growing fast and may need more calories, an adult hedgehog's needs are different.

**KIBBLE:** Your breeder will give you a sample of the food your baby hedgehog is used to eating. If you chose to change this food, do it gradually, mixing a little more of the new food in every few days. For adult hedgehogs, most people choose a mixture of several low-fat, adult, or senior cat foods and some hedgehog foods. In general, look for a high-quality protein source listed as the first or second ingredient, and a lower percentage of fillers. For most adult hedgehogs, 1-2 tablespoons of this staple mix should be fed daily.

#### **OTHER FOODS:**

The staple food should be supplemented with a variety of other foods. Depending on your animal's weight and the size of the insects, you can feed: 1-4 freeze-dried or live mealworms OR 1-4 wax worms; 2-4 crickets; 1-3 silkworms; two half-teaspoon servings of protein sources (lean cooked chicken, salmon, trout, turkey, tuna, boiled egg whites, etc.); and fruit and vegetables such as rice cooked in broth, sweet potatoes, watermelon, banana, kiwi, steamed broccoli, green beans, carrots,

corn, apple, apple sauce, etc. Make sure all food (except insects) is cut into small pieces, and all seeds are removed. Avoid treats or staple foods containing whole or large pieces of nuts or dried fruits as they can cause dental problems or choking, and NEVER feed Vitacraft brand hedgehog food.

## **HEALTH CARE:**

Keeping your hedgehog warm is very important. Since they come from a warm climate, your hedgehog cannot tolerate cooler temperatures. Keep your pet's habitat away from drafts and above 70°F. You should also have a supplemental heat source, like a Snuggle Safe disk in your hedgehog's sleeping area, or a human heating pad set on low and placed under your hedgehog's habitat, under half of the sleeping area. African hedgehogs cannot actually hibernate, although they will go into a hypothermic state if they are too cool. This can be a life-threatening situation. In the summer, a hedgehog can also aestivate, or go into a lethargic state to conserve energy if temperatures are suddenly too high, and this should be avoided as well. If your hedgehog is too cool, they will seem uncoordinated, have trouble walking, feel cool to the touch, and be somewhat less responsive than normal. Gradually warm your pet by keeping him/her tucked into your shirt, or by placing them in a fabric, carrying bag on top of a heating pad set to low. Do not leave your pet there for an extended time, and check on him/her often! If your hedgehog is too warm, they will "splat" out on their tummy, possibly in the open. S/he will be uninterested in food, and possibly unable to walk. Take the reverse approach by gradually cooling hedgegie with a frozen soda bottle wrapped in a towel, or something similar. Aestivation is not as common as hypothermia, and most hedgehogs, if they are given a chance to adjust gradually to warm temperatures, do fine in the warmer months. Great variations in temperature are a problem—if your hedgegie is used to having the air conditioning set at 70°F all summer, and suddenly your power goes out, you will need to make sure s/he has a cool place as soon as possible.

**\*\*\*** You can keep 3 plastic bottles filled 2/3 full of water frozen in your freezer. On hot days, place 1 of them in your hedgehogs enclosure for them to lean up against and cool off. Replace it with a fresh bottle once it has thawed.

Your new hedgehog should see a vet for a healthy-hedgie check up within two weeks of arriving home. Some hedgehogs are more upset than others after changing homes, and you'll need to look for loose or green, slimy stools which could indicate a bacterial overgrowth in your pet's intestines. Most hedgehog health care needs are surprisingly straightforward, if you are prepared. Common hedgehog ailments include obesity, quill loss, tattered ears, and foot injuries can be prevented through proper diet, exercise, and routine care. Before the need arises, find a veterinarian in your area who has experience with hedgehogs. A yearly well-pet visit is recommended, as a good vet can catch many symptoms before they become emergencies. See your vet immediately if your hedgehog collapses, is limp, is having difficulty moving or breathing, is having seizures, shows discharge from eyes, nose or ears, has ingested a foreign substance, has blood in urine or feces, isn't drinking water, or hasn't eaten for more than two days.