

# Southwest Animal Hospital



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## CARING FOR YOUR HEDGEHOG

**GENERAL:** Hedgehogs are small shy insect eating mammals, with quills on top and fur on the face and belly. The quills resemble those of porcupines but are not barbed and do not imbed in the skin when touched. When frightened hedgehogs roll into a ball and emit an odd rattling hiss, and may bounce to try to poke you with their quills. They rarely attempt to bite. There are many species of hedgehogs, including the large European Hedgehog and many African species. The African Pygmy Hedgehog (*A. albiventris*) is the species commonly sold as pets and is currently the only species legal to keep in Oregon. Hedgehogs are shy but non-aggressive animals, and can make decent pets if socialized. They typically live to be 2 ½ to 4 years old.

**HOUSING:** African hedgehogs are native to warm regions and do not tolerate cold temperatures; they should be kept above 70°F. They may be housed in wood or wire cages with solid floors. Avoid wire floors as feet may become caught and bones broken as the pet tries to free itself. Wire floors also tend to cause sores on the feet. Provide a thick layer of good bedding such as recycled paper or hardwood shavings (not cedar or pine). Soft clean towels can be used but should be removed if the pet chews them or if they become frayed; hedgehogs may become tangled in loose threads. Hedgehogs occasionally can be aggressive with each other if housed together and may need to be kept separate to prevent fighting, especially with males.

**FEEDING:** The bulk of the diet should be low fat hedgehog pellets (not a seed & fruit mix). Pellets may be fed free choice unless obesity occurs; use a formula with 30-35% protein and no more than 7% fat. Pretty Pets is a good brand of kibble. Alternatively a *very low fat* cat food such as Hill's W/D (7% fat) may be used. The natural diet is mostly insects; in captivity occasional insects such as crickets or mealworms can be fed, but these are not nutritionally balanced, and should be used sparingly. Earthworms, slugs & silkworms are healthier food items, if the animal will accept them. Fresh water should always be available. Ball bearing bottles are cleaner and not as easily spilled as bowls. Clean the cage, food and water sources regularly.

### COMMON DISEASES:

**Obesity:** The most common medical problem seen in captive hedgehogs is obesity. The usual cause is feeding high calorie foods such as regular cat food, seeds or nuts, or fatty insects such as mealworms and crickets. But hedgehogs can overeat even on a low fat hedgehog diet, and food intake often must be restricted to maintain proper body weight. Healthy hedgehogs should appear twice as long as they are wide, and are not round in shape (except when rolled up). Obesity increases the risk of tumor development and may shorten your pet's life span. Weight loss should be accomplished slowly, as obese pets who lose weight too rapidly may develop liver disease. Regular exercise outside the cage helps; some will use an exercise wheel as well.

**Weight loss:** As previously discussed, hedgehogs are aggressive eaters and rarely lose weight unless put on a strict diet. Spontaneous weight loss is a cause for concern as it usually indicates significant illness, such as dental disease, cancer, heart disease, uterine disease, etc. Seek immediate veterinary advice if you notice your pet losing weight for no apparent reason.

**Dental Diseases:** Hedgehogs often develop gum disease and tooth infection with age. Signs may include salivation, difficulty eating, and bad breath. Infected teeth may be loose and painful. Perhaps more importantly, chronic gingivitis that is left untreated may lead to oral cancer (squamous cell carcinoma) which is often fatal. Appropriate dental care, including tooth cleaning, oral antibiotics, and extraction of any badly infected teeth, can help keep the mouth healthy and reduce the risk of oral cancer. A thorough oral exam may require sedation with shy hedgehogs, but if your pet is over 1 ½ years old, it is definitely recommended.

**Mites:** These are common skin parasites but often produce no symptoms until the mite population grows large. Mites are microscopic, and when numerous cause itching, flaking, and quill loss. Severe cases may develop scabs or sores due to intense scratching and biting at the skin. Mites respond to treatment with ivermectin (oral or injectable) weekly for 6-8 weeks. Lyme sulfur dip may help when applied once or twice weekly for 6-8 weeks but is more labor-intensive and must be applied thoroughly. Cleaning the cage weekly when treating the mites may help reduce reinfestation, but long term environmental treatment is unnecessary as the parasites die if they are off their host for long. These parasites are species specific but highly contagious between hedgehogs; use caution when introducing new pets to an existing group.

**Respiratory infection:** Signs include sneezing, wheezing, lethargy, nasal or eye discharge, or difficulty breathing. Various bacteria may cause this. Treatment is with antibiotics. Minimize respiratory disease with a warm, clean cage; avoid use of wood chip beddings, and feed a balanced diet.

**Head tilt (wry neck, torticollis):** This is usually due to internal ear infection, sometimes secondary to a respiratory infection. The hedgehog usually tilts the head to one side and has a loss of balance, often falling or circling when trying to walk. Bacteria are the usual cause. Treatment is with antibiotics.

**Fight wounds:** Hedgehogs occasionally can be aggressive with each other, and sometimes fight if housed together. This may result in bite wounds. Any visible wounds require immediate medical treatment; the risk of infection is great, and early antibiotic therapy to prevent infection is the safest option.

**Cancers:** Hedgehogs are highly prone to many types of cancer when older; common types include oral tumors (squamous cell cancer), uterine cancer, and mammary tumors in females (breast cancer). Any visible lump should be checked immediately by a veterinarian. Oral odor, drooling, or difficulty eating are cause for concern. Many tumors are curable if caught early and removed. Weight control may reduce risk of some tumors. Spaying female hedgehogs likely reduces risk of mammary tumors, and eliminates risk of uterine cancer. Dentistry and controlling oral infections may reduce risk of oral cancer.

**Heart disease (cardiomyopathy):** This is a degenerative disease of the heart which is seen in many pet species including dogs, cats and ferrets, and also in humans. The causes are unknown, but some forms in dogs and cats have been linked to nutritional deficiencies. Signs of heart failure include bloating, lethargy, and difficulty breathing. Treatment may control symptoms for months but isn't likely to cure the disease. Risk of heart disease might be reduced by feeding a balanced diet and preventing obesity.

**Degenerative myelopathy (Wobbler syndrome):** A poorly understood disease of unknown origin, which causes slow deterioration of the spinal cord. This causes gradual weakness and paralysis beginning in the rear legs and usually progressing to the front legs over time. Total paralysis can result. There is no effective treatment in most cases, and the condition is often fatal.

**Hair or thread entanglements:** Hedgehogs are prone to becoming entangled in long pieces of thread (from bedding such as frayed towels) or in pieces of owners' hair. The strands wrap around a leg or foot (or occasionally the penis in males) and act like a tourniquet, cutting into the skin and cutting off blood flow. Infection and loss of the foot may result. Minimize exposure to long hairs, strings or threads in the cage environment. If your pet is limping or has a swollen foot seek immediate veterinary care.