



468 Street Lane, Moortown
Leeds LS17 6HA

t 0113 236 9030

f 0113 266 3048

e info@hollyhousevets.co.uk

w www.hollyhousevets.co.uk

Guide to keeping African Pygmy Hedgehogs

The African Pygmy Hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*) is a relative newcomer to the pet trade, and is native to West and Central Africa, occupying a wide range of habitats, including grassland, scrub, savannah and suburban gardens. They live in burrows, piles of vegetation and rock crevices and are able to climb, dig and swim.

Unlike the European hedgehog, African pygmy hedgehogs do not hibernate, but can enter a 'torpid' state during periods of extreme temperature.

BIOLOGY

African pygmy hedgehogs are generally solitary and nocturnal. Their vision is generally poor, but the senses of hearing and smell are acute. They exhibit a variety of vocalisations. They will curl up into a ball, extending their spines, puffing up and hissing when threatened. They can also exhibit 'self-anointing' behaviour whereby they produce large amounts of frothy saliva after licking a new or irritating substance. The saliva is then placed on the spines with the tongue. The reason is unclear, but proposed theories include self-defence and pheromonal communication. Colour varieties found in the pet trade include the standard coloured quill, 'salt and pepper' and the all white quilled 'snowflake'.

The average lifespan of an African pygmy hedgehog in the wild is 1-4 years, and 5-10 years in captivity (provided diet and husbandry are optimum). The males tend to be larger than the females. They tend to be territorial and solitary, except during courtship and when females raise their young.

HOUSING

Hedgehogs are best housed individually, although juveniles raised together may tolerate each other when fully grown. Fighting commonly occurs between males in particular. They prefer dark, quiet environments and may be easily stressed by loud noises and bright lights.

Enclosures should be as large as possible as hedgehogs are very active creatures – a minimum of 60 x 90 cm is recommended. Enclosures must be secure, as they are renowned escape artists, and easy to clean. If wire enclosures are used, the wire spacing must be appropriate to prevent limb or head entrapment. A hide box or hollow log should be provided as a shelter, and cleaned regularly. If more than one hedgehog is kept in one enclosure, at least one hide box each should be provided per hedgehog. Some hedgehogs may also be trained to use a litter tray. Bedding should be absorbent and soft, such as recycled newspaper or alfalfa pellets, and this should be changed frequently. The bedding should be deep enough to allow some digging. Exercise time outside of the enclosure should be allowed daily, as long as the exercise area is 'hedgehog-proof'. Care should be taken to avoid access to fibres of cords that may get caught around the hedgehog's legs, or small objects that might be ingested.

A 12 hour photoperiod (light/dark cycle) is recommended. The optimum temperature for the enclosure is 24-30C. If the temperature is too cold or too hot, torpor will be induced. Under-enclosure heat mats or radiant heat sources (eg. ceramic lamps) can be used to maintain an appropriate temperature, although care should be taken to make sure that the hedgehog cannot contact these and become burnt. Thermometers are recommended to monitor the enclosure temperature.

Hedgehogs generally will readily use exercise wheels. Exercise is important to prevent obesity and pododermatitis (inflammation of the surfaces of the feet) – both common in captive African pygmy hedgehogs. The wheel should be solid so as to avoid the risk of leg trauma.

DIET

African pygmy hedgehogs are insectivore/omnivores. In the wild, they would eat insects, arachnids, worms, snails, slugs and occasionally small vertebrates, eggs and fruit, although a complete scientific study of their nutritional requirements has not yet been performed. As a result it can be difficult to advise on an 'ideal' diet.

Most pet hedgehogs will thrive on a diet of canned or dry low-fat cat or dog food or specific hedgehog diet, which should be supplemented with earthworms, mealworms, crickets and a small amount of chopped fruit (eg. banana, grape, apple and pear) and vegetables (eg. beans, cooked carrots, squash, peas, tomatoes, leafy greens). One key to balanced nutrition is variety. Food can be hidden within the bedding to encourage foraging activity. A larval insect-only diet can lead to calcium/phosphorus imbalances and metabolic bone disease, and so should be avoided. Milk tends to cause diarrhoea, and nuts and grains will tend to become wedged between the teeth. Providing dry kibble-type foods rather than canned, and insects with chitinous exoskeletons will help to reduce the development of dental disease.

Hedgehogs should be fed in the evening, in accordance with their nocturnal nature. The animal's weight and activity levels should be monitored closely and rations adjusted accordingly

if the hedgehog is becoming overweight.

Water can be offered in a bowl or bottle feeder, and should be changed daily.

ZOONOSES

(diseases which may be passed from animals to humans)

As with some other species commonly kept as pets, African pygmy hedgehogs may carry Salmonella, which can sometimes be transmitted to people. Strict hygiene is therefore advised when handling these animals, with handwashing after handling and regular disinfection of areas where they are kept. Ringworm (a fungal skin infection) is another possible zoonosis which may be carried by hedgehogs. Please contact your vet to discuss further if you are concerned about zoonotic infections.

VETERINARY CARE

There are no vaccinations or preventative parasite treatments recommended for African pygmy hedgehogs, and indeed neutering is rarely carried out as they are generally kept alone. Some individuals may need regular claw clipping. They can be prone to certain skin problems, including ringworm infection or mites, and are prone to obesity and dental disease. Tumours are also relatively common in this species.

If you have any concerns about the health of your pet, please contact your vet. Often a full examination or diagnostic tests will require gas anaesthesia as the hedgehogs will tend to curl up when presented at the surgery, making examination challenging!