

# Outlawed in 6 States, These Exotic Critters Make Great Companions

As long as you don't live in any of these locations that are off limits, and you know what you're getting into, these domesticated animals can make wonderful pets. Just make sure you learn all you can first, including their unique nutritional and behavioral needs, as they're not for everyone.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Most hedgehogs in the U.S. are called African pygmy hedgehogs. They were bred from African species to be kept as pets
- It's against the law to keep African pygmy hedgehogs as pets in Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New York City
- Hedgehogs can make great little companions for knowledgeable owners, but they aren't the best pets for everyone
- Before adopting an exotic pet like a hedgehog, it's important to learn all you can about the animal, including its nutritional and behavioral needs
- If you're interested in acquiring a hedgehog as a pet, please check for adoptable animals at your local shelter, rescue organization, and/or Petfinder.com first

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## Fun Facts About Pet Hedgehogs

1. **Your pet hedgehog can't survive in the wild**



There are 17 species of hedgehogs that are native to parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, and New Zealand (by introduction). There are no hedgehogs native to Australia, and no living species native to North or South America.

The hedgehogs in the U.S. — typically African pygmy hedgehogs — are domesticated, meaning they have been bred to be pets. Your hedgehog has no idea how to survive in the wild, and pet hedgehogs that are “set free” by their owners generally don’t make it because they can’t adapt to temperature extremes, can’t find food, and are easy targets for predators.

It is against the law to keep African pygmy hedgehogs as pets in Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New York City. That's because hedgehogs can wreak havoc on the local environment if they get outside.

## **2. Hedgehogs are not rodents — they belong to the order Erinaceomorpha**



Though your hedgehog may look like a mini-porcupine, porcupines are rodents (they belong to the order Rodentia), and hedgehogs are not. They once belonged to the now defunct order Insectivora, because they are insectivores (insect eaters). But your hedgehog isn’t a strict insectivore — her wild cousins eat a regular banquet of food, including amphibians, berries, bird eggs, carrion, fish, grass roots, lizards, melons, mushrooms, snails, and snakes.

A balanced diet for a pet hedgehog should include a variety of species-appropriate insects, plus a supplemental hedgehog-specific pelleted formula when insects aren’t available, as well as a small amount of fruits, veggies, and lean meats.

### 3. **Hedgehogs have quills — lots and lots of quills**



Your hedgehog's back contains two large, strong muscles that control the positioning of the quills. Believe it or not, the average hedgehog comes equipped with from 5,000 to 6,500 quills. The outer surface of the quills is quite sturdy, while air pockets fill the inside of each quill.

### 4. **Pet hedgehogs need regular handling and human interaction**



Domesticated hedgehogs that spend quality time with their humans will come to know their owner's voice, appearance, and scent. Even when curled up in a bristly, nervous little ball, if your hedgehog has bonded with you, he'll relax when he hears your voice or picks up your scent.

The best way to socialize your hedgehog is with plenty of regular, gentle handling and interaction. Ignoring him or rarely handling him can result in a shy hedgehog that is constantly fearful and balled up. Hedgehogs can make great pets for guardians who give them plenty of time, attention, and care.

### 5. **Pet hedgehogs can easily grow obese**





Hedgehogs are good eaters — they love to eat and given the chance, will overeat. Hedgehogs in cages without much to do and few opportunities to exercise tend to get porky. If your hedgehog has chubby legs and fat pockets showing below the spiny top half of her body, she's overweight.

A fat hedgehog may not be able to roll up into a ball, and an unbalanced diet can result in metabolic changes leading to brittle bones. If your little friend is overweight or obese, it's important to institute portion controlled meals and insure she gets plenty of exercise both outside her cage and on a wheel inside her habitat.

#### 6. **Hedgehogs are night owls**



Hedgehogs are nocturnal, meaning they're active at night, even those kept as pets. So expect your hedgehog to sleep the day away and cut loose when the sun goes down. If you think your sleep may be disturbed by a pet that parties all night long, a nocturnal animal like a hedgehog may not be your best bet.

#### 7. **Hedgehogs vocalize**





Chances are your hedgehog will make his presence known with a variety of endearing sounds, including snorts, snuffles, squeaks, and grunts. When they're not happy, hedgehogs tend to make clicking or hissing sounds. Purring or whistling means he's feeling content.

The one noise you never want to hear from your hedgehog is screaming, as it means he's in pain.

#### 8. **An anxious hedgehog is a bristly hedgehog**



The sharp spines that cover your hedgehog's back are a form of protection. In the wild, if she's picked up in a predator's mouth, she'll move around as much as she's able to so that her quills dig into the lips and mouth of her nemesis. She's hoping her captor will release her when all that jabbing gets too painful.

If your hedgehog is a little on edge, it can be a challenge to hold her. Try cradling her in a small blanket or towel until she feels more comfortable.

#### 9. **A hedgehog that feels threatened will roll up in a tight ball**



This is another hedgehog defense tactic. If your hedgehog feels vulnerable, he may roll himself into a tight little spike-covered ball that hides his face and legs. Hedgehogs have surprisingly strong muscles in their backs, and once yours is all balled up, good luck trying to untangle him.

You should make it a point to handle your hedgehog regularly and gently so that he learns to relax in your hands.

#### 10. **Hedgehogs behave strangely when they encounter new smells**



This appears to be yet another defense strategy called anointing. When your hedgehog is presented with something that has an unfamiliar odor, given the chance, she'll lick and gnaw the thing and create a ball of foamy spittle in her mouth that contains the new smell.

Then things get really weird, because her next move is to toss back her head, spray the foam over her spines, and then use her tongue to paste it in place, probably as a form of camouflage.

## Sources and References

[VetStreet November 18, 2024.](#)

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