

All About Hedgehogs – 7 Facts About These Adorable Animals

Hedgehogs are native to Asia, Africa, and Europe, but in the US they're domesticated and often sold as pets. These intriguing insectivores have unique methods of self-defense and, if socialized from a young age, can even bond with their owners — but do hedgehogs really make good pets?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hedgehogs are small, carnivorous animals native to Europe, Africa, and Asia
- Hedgehogs are not native to North or South America, so those that live in the U.S. are typically African pygmy hedgehogs, which are domesticated and sold as pets
- Hedgehogs are nocturnal, prone to obesity if they're overfed or inactive and curl up into a spiny ball when scared or anxious
- Hedgehogs may carry salmonella bacteria in their stool or fungus capable of causing ringworm on their quills and skin, so wash your hands thoroughly after interacting with one or cleaning their cage
- If you are considering one of these unique pets there are plenty to choose from at your local hedgehog rescue organization or shelter

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Hedgehogs are small, carnivorous animals native to Europe, Africa and Asia. With a coat full of spines or quills, they're often compared to porcupines, but the two are totally different animals. While porcupines are rodents, **hedgehogs** are a spiny mammal known as insectivores. Also, whereas porcupines can shoot their quills in self-defense, hedgehogs cannot, though they do roll into a spiny ball that's too prickly for many predators to dine on.

Hedgehogs are not native to North or South America, so those that live in the U.S. are typically African pygmy hedgehogs, which are domesticated and sold as pets. There are, however, wild hedgehogs in Europe, Asia and Africa. In the wild, hedgehogs like to feast on insects along with a varied diet of reptiles, small rodents, eggs and fledgling birds and even some vegetables and fruits.¹ If you're wondering where hedgehogs got their name, it actually makes perfect sense. National Geographic reported:²

"The hedgehog was named because of its peculiar foraging methods. These animals root through hedges and other undergrowth in search of the small creatures that compose the bulk of their diet — insects, worms, centipedes, snails, mice, frogs, and snakes. As a hedgehog picks its way through the hedges it emits piglike grunts — thus, the hedgehog."

7 Intriguing Hedgehog Facts

If you've ever been curious to learn more about hedgehogs, now's your chance. Here are seven facts about these interesting creatures.

1. **Groundhog day used to be hedgehog day** — In fact, the tradition of using hedgehogs to predict when spring would arrive started in Germany. When German settlers arrived in Pennsylvania, there were no hedgehogs around so they had to settle for groundhogs.³
2. **It's nearly impossible to unroll a curled-up hedgehog** — If you come across a hedgehog that's rolled into a tight ball, leave it be. It's virtually impossible to unroll one, anyway.⁴ When a hedgehog feels relaxed and unthreatened, he'll unroll on his own.
3. **Hedgehogs like to make spit balls** — Hedgehogs have a tendency to lick new scents and then form a similarly scented spit ball that they use to coat their spines. It's thought this may be a way for the animals to take on a new scent, thereby "camouflaging" themselves from predators' sharp noses.⁵ They also use this spit-ball process to spread saliva with plant poison (to which they're immune) over their spikes, offering them even more protection against predators.⁶
4. **Hedgehogs are primarily nocturnal** — Some hedgehog owners learned the hard way that these creatures like to run, search for food and play at night, while you're probably trying to sleep. Their activity levels also depend on their climate. In cold weather, wild hedgehogs hibernate, and in hot climates they aestivate (similar to hibernation but during hot, dry spells). If they live in temperate regions, hedgehogs will stay active year-round.⁷
5. **Baby hedgehogs are called hoglets** — Hoglets remain with their mothers for just four to seven weeks. After that, the animals are largely solitary, except during mating. Their lifespan is about 7 to 10 years.
6. **Hedgehogs make a wide variety of noises** — It's often thought that hedgehogs are silent creatures, but this is a myth. They may grunt, squeal, snort and snuffle, as well as click or hiss. When they're happy and content, hedgehogs purr or whistle, and when they're in pain, they scream.⁸
7. **Hedgehogs can spread some human diseases** — Hedgehogs may carry **salmonella bacteria** in their stool or fungus capable of causing ringworm on their quills and skin. As with any small mammal, you should wash your hands after interacting with him or cleaning his cage.

Do Hedgehogs Make Good Pets?

Hedgehogs are an exotic, adorable and small animal that is sometimes described as an ideal pet, and sometimes just the opposite. If a hedgehog is socialized with its owner from a young age, it's true that he can bond with the owner and respond to your sight and smell. Some hedgehogs even enjoy being handled by their owners. However, there are many factors that make hedgehogs less-than-ideal pets. If they're nervous or scared, they'll roll into a tight, prickly ball, which makes handling them difficult.

In addition, if they're fed improperly (or overfed), hedgehogs are prone to obesity. Ideally hedgehogs should consume their evolutionary diet of a vast array of bugs. Unfortunately, most hedgies are fed a poor-quality, commercially available extruded "hedgehog food" very similar to cheap, dry dog food. The negative health consequences are also very similar between the two diets. The increased risk of obesity is also true if they spend too much time in their cages without opportunity to move around.

Remember that hedgehogs like to spend much of their day sleeping, "coming to life" at night when their owners want to rest, which can make it difficult to give your hedgehog the mental and physical stimulation he needs.

Other practical considerations include that it's illegal to own a hedgehog in certain states and, while some hedgehogs are captive-bred as pets, they're also popular in the exotic pet trade and have been sold as ideal pets for kids. Because they are nocturnal and can end up disturbing kids' sleep, many hedgehogs end up in local shelters.

In the vast majority of cases, wild animals who wind up as pets live short, unnatural existences in inappropriate housing, with inadequate care and poor nutrition. Even in the case of domesticated hedgehogs, their owners sometimes release them into the wild, where they'll have a difficult time surviving and could wreak havoc on local environments.

Like **sugar gliders** and other exotic pets, think carefully before adding a hedgehog to your family and, if you decide to do so, consider adopting one from a rescue organization.

Sources and References

¹ [Hedgehogworld.com May 26, 2010 \(Archived\)](#).
^{2, 7} [National Geographic, Hedgehog](#).
^{3, 4} [Vetstreet February 2, 2017](#)
^{5, 8} [Vetstreet November 18, 2024](#)
⁶ [National Geographic Kids, Hedgehog](#)
