

African Pygmy Hedgehog Care Sheet

Diet -

The staple diet of African Pygmy Hedgehogs (APH) is non fish based/ flavoured cat biscuits. When looking for suitable biscuits you should be looking at the fat percentage and the protein percentage. The recommended fat percentage is 10% - 15%, and the minimum 30% protein range. Some suitable biscuits can include protein levels of 40%. High levels of protein can be hard on the kidneys, so are not recommended to be fed by themselves but can be used successfully as part of a mix. When looking for suitable foods meat content should be the first ingredient, the higher the percentage of this, the higher quality the cat food is deemed to be. When looking through ingredients many biscuits will contain fish oil. These biscuits are fine to use as long as they don't contain fish, fish meal and meet the suitable requirements.

Kitten food is not advised to be fed long term because of the higher fat/ protein levels and it usually contains milk.

Wet cat food is not recommended as it has no nutritional value and can make your hedgehogs poop very smelly.

A single brand of cat food can be fed but its recommended to feed a mix, this is for several reasons-

- it adds variety to the diet to prevent boredom.
- it enables you to mix and match foods to balance out levels, and ensure there is a wide range of nutrients available. So for example, a higher fat content can be balanced out by adding a lower fat content to the mix and the same with protein levels.
- If a food is discontinued or the ingredients changed, then your hedgehog doesn't have to change foods suddenly.

When feeding a mix, it is important to ensure that your hedgehog is not selectively eating and is eating all parts of the mix.

Cat biscuits should be freely fed unless your hedgehog is on a weight reducing regime. Providing a diet that is high in fat increases the risk of obesity and also fatty liver disease.

Foods marketed for European hedgehogs (such as Spikes), should be avoided as they are not suitable for APH. They also often contain nuts and seeds which are a choking hazard.

APH are insectivores by nature, so a certain level of bugs (not garden caught ones as these can be contaminated by all sorts of nasties!), should be allowed in their diets.

These can include –

Mealworms – these are a great bribery aid for owners with a new or even huffy hedgehog.

Crickets/ small locusts/ cockroaches – when being fed live, they can be stunned by placing them in the fridge for a few minutes to slow them down.

Waxworms – these are very fatty and should be fed rarely and strictly as treats.

Insects can be fed in dried or live form. The benefit of feeding in live form is that they can be gut loaded. Gut loading involves feeding the live foods with vegetables and fruit. This means that the goodness consumed by the live foods is passed straight into your hedgehog; this is especially helpful if you have a hedgehog that is a fussy or picky eater. When feeding bugs, they can be placed in a sided bowl (to help prevent them escaping), hand fed or you can use tweezers.

Hedgehogs should also be fed a variety of cooked meats, vegetables and fruits 2 – 3 times a week.

Meats – chicken, turkey/beef/lamb mince. This can be dry fried or boiled until cooked thoroughly with NO added salt. Serve at room temperature and cut into suitable mouth sized pieces. Any excess fat should be drained.

Vegetables – a wide variety of vegetables can be fed (see below for a list of toxic items), these should be cooked thoroughly and again NO added salt. Vegetables, once cooked, can be chopped or mashed, but do NOT add milk, butter or margarine of any sort.

Fruits (non citrus) – again a wide range of fruits can be fed, (see below for list of toxic items). Feed at room temperature as feeding cold or straight out of the fridge may cause tummy upsets. Feed in small pieces (with pips/ skin removed) or mashed.

Scrambled egg – should be made without any milk/ butter/ oil.

TOXIC FOODS-

Milk/ cheese/ dairy products – hedgehogs are lactose intolerant.

Avocado/ grapes/ raisins – potentially fatal for lots of small animals.

Chocolate – dairy aspect, unhealthy for obvious reasons and toxic to many animals.

Citrus foods – too acidic.

Onion/ garlic – toxic for many animals.

Fish – it is believed that hedgehogs cannot digest fish or fishmeal properly. When changing your hedgehogs food over, whether it is to a new biscuit or introducing a new vegetable, remember to do it gradually and in small amounts to prevent stomach upsets.

Fresh drinking water should be made available at all times. Tap water is fine.

Housing –

The minimum cage space should be 3ft x 1.5ft x1.5ft, any extra is beneficial to your hedgehog as it will use all of the space provided. Shorted lengths can be accommodated by increasing the width to ensure a similar floor space is achieved.

Housing should incorporate substrate, litter tray, a 12 inch wheel, food and water bowls, some form of housing and toys.

Hedgehog housing should be placed in an area that has access to 12 hours of daylight and must be free from draughts.

The temperature rang suitable for hedghogs is between 18 – 28 degrees centigrade, with the ideal being 21 – 24 on average. Some hedgehogs are more prone to hibernation than others so this must also be taken into consideration.

When housing a hedgehog, there are several options you can consider, they all have pros and cons.

Zoozone 2 – this is the large zoozone (the medium ones are too small).

Pros – they are easily available, easy to clean and assemble. These are easily moved and mostly good at maintaining temperatures.

Cons – can be fragile especially if dropped. They cannot be stacked as it prevents adequate ventilation and it can also be difficult to add extra heat due to them being plastic based.

Barred cages –

Pros – good ventilation, relatively easy to clean. Can be stacked depending on position of doors.

Cons – considered high risk due to hedgehogs climbing the bars resulting in falls (potentially fatal) or falling and trapping limbs between bars. Barred cages can be adapted by placing Perspex, cardboard, or anything easily attachable and smooth to the bottom section of the bars so that the hedgehog cannot reach them and therefore cannot climb. Stacking barred cages can also mean that to clean them or gain access to remove wheels etc for cleaning that you would need to unstack them

They are more difficult to heat and they don't hold the heat very well.

Vivariums – Vivariums with glass doors need to be adapted by adding extra vents to improve circulation.

Pros – stackable, excellent for maintain temperatures, easy to add extra heating and durable.

Cons – heavier than cages so not easy to move about. Can be expensive if shop bought or if self and will need more vents adding.

Other enclosures – rabbit hutches, pieces of furniture etc

They are fine if adapted safely (no sharp splinters of wood etc), replacing 'chicken wired' fronts of rabbit cages as hedgehogs can climb chicken wire.

Pro's and cons's tend to be similar to vivariums.

Any ramps used in home built items need to be made safe so the hedgehog does not fall from any significant height – falls like this can cause serious internal injuries.

Unsuitable housing – aquariums (they retain moisture/ poor ventilation which can result in respiratory infections), free roaming living areas, unsecured enclosures (all housing need to be escape proof), and wire bottomed cages.

Suitable bedding for hedgehogs can include –

- Fleece liners – loose stitching and/or threads must be removed. It is important to check them regularly after washing.
- Finacard – must be dust free. This substrate is good for foraging behaviour.

Unsuitable bedding –

- Hay/ straw, carpet, towels or anything with loops or loose threads.
- Thin strips of fabric /hamster bedding – all these can wind around hedgehogs legs and feet, cutting off circulation and can result in limb damage or loss.
- Sawdust/ wood shavings/ wood chips – these are all unsuitable as they can get stuck in eyes and genitals. They can also cause respiratory infections.

Hedgehogs need to be provided with bed space and a hiding place. Fleece snuggle pouches, plastic igloos, wooden huts, squares of cut up fleece, finacard or similar are suitable.

Heat mats and ceramic heat emitters should always be used with a thermostat attached. Reptile heat mats get very hot so they are not recommended for use. UV lighting in cages should not be used .

Common ailments/ illnesses -

Obesity - a hedgehog should be pear shaped when viewed from above and able to curl up in a tight ball. Hedgehogs that cannot curl into a tight ball and have obvious excess folds of skin/ fat around their necks/ bodies are overweight.

Mites – these cause dry, itchy skin and quill loss. They look like moving white dots and they can be seen if you hold your hedgehog over a piece of dark material/ paper and if you brush the quills gently so they fall onto this. Sometimes mites will chew the quill roots, so if dropped spines are missing the root/ball then this is a good indicator of mites.

Fungal skin infections – can result in skin irritation and quill loss. This will require veterinary attention.

Dry skin and/or quill loss – usually associated with quilling, mites or fungal infections.

Abscesses/ ingrowing quills – can be recurrent and will need veterinary attention

Lumps - will need veterinary attention as soon as possible as hedgehogs are prone to cancerous tumours.

Small cuts and scrapes – if kept clean and dry, also depending on the actual size of them, can usually heal on their own. Seek veterinary attention if redness, inflammation or seeping areas occur or any other signs of infection.

Sneezing – can be caused by dusty or wet bedding. If accompanied by any other signs such as lethargy, appetite loss, runny nose etc then immediate veterinary attention should be sought.

Teeth/ mouth problems – any bleeding from the mouth or lumps/ bumps being present then this should be checked by a vet as teeth can cause numerous problems.

Poop – this is usually brown in colour and quite firm. Sometimes hedgehogs can have green coloured stools due to stress. If green poop continues it should be checked out as soon as possible, as should diarrhoea, slimy looking stools and stools with signs of blood in them. Hedgehogs can become dehydrated very quickly.

Choking – usually caused by food getting stuck in the roof of their mouths and hedgehogs will sometimes gag, vomit or hyper salivate to remove the item. If they fail to remove it themselves, you can help them by using the tip of a small syringe/ pipette or cotton bud and flick it forwards. Be careful though not to push it down the hedgehog's throat.

Weight loss – if hedgehogs lose weight and continue to do so, it should always be checked out by a vet.

Ringworm – this is a fungal infection that is uncommon in APH. It causes itchy red rings and sore skin in humans. It does require veterinary attention for treatment and if passed to humans then this will require medical attention from a doctor.

Inner ear infection – can resemble WHS symptoms such as wobbliness and head tilting, can also be accompanied by discharge from the ears. This requires quick veterinary attention.

Upper respiratory infection – sneezing, runny nose, eyes, raspy breathing / panting. URGENT veterinary attention required as it can quickly result in pneumonia, which can be fatal.

Fatty liver disease - this is caused by obesity or too much fat in the diet. This requires to veterinary attention.

WHS (Wobbly Hedgehog Syndrome) – this is a progressive, degenerative and neurological disease, the cause of which is still uncertain. There are no known cures. WHS can only be diagnosed by post mortem and there are only a small handful of confirmed cases in the UK.

Hibernation - APH cannot be allowed to hibernate, it will prove fatal to them. Signs of hibernation include

- cool belly to the touch
- unable to stand up or hold their head up
- wobbliness
- slowed reactions
- hedgehog being curled up into a tight ball and unable to uncurl
- lethargy
- not eating as much as they once were

These can all be a sign that the temperatures are too cool for your hedgehog to function properly. Raise the temperature if your hedgehog displays any of these signs.

If your hedgehog is displaying any of the above signs and is attempting to hibernate then you must warm them up immediately. You can use a covered heat mat/ hot water bottle, snuggle safe disc, putting them under your jumper to gain body heat. DO NOT put them in water and DO NOT use a hairdryer to warm them up. Don't leave your hedgehog unattended whilst they come round. Once they have come round offer them easy access to food and water.

- If you get no response after 60 minutes, then they will need to see a vet.

Once your hedgehog has attempted hibernation once then they often become more prone to trying again so temperatures must be monitored closely.

When treating your hedgehog for anything, it is important to remember that things like tea tree oil are toxic to APH and whilst a lot of medications etc are suitable for European hedgehogs, they may not be suitable for APH so it's always best to check if you are not sure.

In general it is always a good idea to check your hedgehog over every time you handle them, this way problems can be spotted early on. This doesn't have to include poking and prodding them every time as that will just result in a huffy hedgehog. Get to know your hedgehog's habits, try and get them used to being touched in places such as their feet so it becomes less stressful if they should ever need to see a vet. If ever in doubt, there are plenty of places where you can get advice but if you suspect your hedgehog is ill please do not wait for a reply from a forum or facebook page, phone a vet.

For more information on caring for your hedgehog and on the topics discussed here, or if you just want a friendly place to chat about hedgehogs with like minded people please take a look at these places.

<http://homelesshogs.forumotion.co.uk/>

<http://www.homelesshogs.co.uk/>

<http://homelesshogs.forumotion.co.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Homelesshogs>

or join our facebook group – National Exotic Hedgehog Rescue.