

## **African Pygmy Hedgehogs as Pets**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Socializing hedgehogs as pets**
- **Restrictions in the U.S. on owning hedgehogs**
- **Risk of skin irritation from handling hedgehogs**

African Pygmy Hedgehogs, also called the four-toed or white-bellied hedgehog, are solitary, territorial, nocturnal, insect-eating mammals from the southern Sahara desert that prefer to live alone. Most of their body is covered by 1/4 to 1 inch long spines (quills). The spines are used for defense and to cushion falls. African pygmy hedgehogs are not able to fling their spines.

Foot (or hoof)-and-mouth disease is a viral disease of cloven hoofed farm animals that has been reported in hedgehogs. Imported hedgehogs can also carry anthrax and could survive as feral animals after escape or abandonment in the southern U.S. As a result, African hedgehogs cannot be imported legally and they cannot be legally owned in some states (California, Hawaii, Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Maine, and Vermont) and several cities.

### **Natural Behavior of African Pygmy Hedgehogs**

Hedgehogs in the wild live in a variety of environments, including in rock crevices, brush, or burrows. They are solitary living except at breeding time. Hedgehogs grunt when foraging for food. This hog-like vocalization and a preference to forage along hedgerows were how the small marsupial got its common name. They are sensitive to strange sounds and have an excellent sense of smell which they use in foraging for food, but their vision is weak. Tactile sensations are perceived by touching with their spines and vibrissae (whiskers). Typical vocalizations are grunting, clicking, snorting, and sniffing, but hissing will occur if it feels threatening. Screams occur if distressed. When feeling endangered, they will elevate spines on their forehead and curl into a ball. They are good at digging, climbing, and swimming. They are resistant to many venoms, including those of many snakes, bees, beetles, and spiders. They have small teeth and will bite if irritated or threatened.

Females have five pairs of nipples and a very close anogential (AG) distance. The male's AG distance is much longer and the penis is located near the mid abdomen.

### **Approaching and Catching**

Capture of socialized hedgehogs requires slowly scooping it from underneath its belly with one or two hands. Their bellies are covered with soft fur, but their backs are covered with short, prickly spines. If fearful or hungry, hedgehogs may bite.

Socialization of hedgehogs with handlers is best begun when the hedgehog is six to eight weeks of age. Handling young hedgehogs with bare hands will accustom them to the handler's odors. Use of perfumed hand soap or lotions should be avoided. Additional positive conditioning to be handled can be provided with treats, such as mealworms, while the hedgehog is being handled.

Latex or light leather gloves or a towel should be used to handle strange or untrained hedgehogs. Although their spines are not barbed, spines may penetrate a handler's skin. When excited they "anoint" (spread a thick frothy saliva) their spines which can cause skin irritation in some handlers. Gentle handling is needed to prevent them from rolling into a defensive ball and make a hissing sound.

### **Handling for Routine Care and Management**

Properly socialized hedgehogs can be held in cupped hands. Difficult hedgehogs can be scruffed by the skin between the ears. Alternatively, a rear leg can be grasped. Attempts to forcefully uncurl a hedgehog that has rolled into a defensive ball should be avoided due to the risk of injury to the hedgehog.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Several states in the U.S. prohibit owning pet hedgehogs.**
- 2. Hedgehogs should be socialized to humans at 6 to 8 weeks of age.**
- 3. Light gloves should be worn when handling unknown background or unsocialized hedgehogs.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.