

## PROJECT IDEA STARTER

# Hedgehogs

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Members of the hedgehog subfamily live across Europe and Asia to western China and in Africa. The African pygmy hedgehog, *Atelerix albiventris*, sometimes referred to as a white-bellied hedgehog, is one of 17 species of the family Erinaceidae. The African pygmy hedgehog originated in Africa and lives naturally from the Savannas (western Africa) to southern Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania (eastern Africa).

In the wild, hedgehogs hibernate when the temperature becomes cold. They go into an inactive, dormant state (estivation) during hot weather when the season is dry. During hibernation and estivation, they live off their fat reserves. This is very dangerous for captive-bred hedgehogs. Pet hedgehogs should be maintained at 75 F to 80 F as false hibernation is likely the number one cause of accidental pet death.

Hedgehogs in the wild are insectivores, thriving mainly on a diet of insects. They also eat eggs of reptiles and small ground-dwelling birds, very small amounts of vegetation, small rodents, and reptiles. In the wild, the African pygmy hedgehog eats one-third of its body weight each night. Hedgehogs are lactose intolerant and should never be given milk, milk-based products, sweets, or other junk food.

Hedgehogs are characterized by their long snouts and spiny coats. They have 36–44 very

sharp teeth, with the first pair of incisors markedly larger than the rest. The front feet of the African pygmy hedgehog have five toes each, and the rear feet have four toes each. An African pygmy hedgehog reaches 6 to 8 inches in length and weighs between 16 and 25 ounces. More than a third of this weight comes from its spines. These are hollow, horny hairs covering its back and sides. The spines of the natural color are an agouti or “salt and pepper” color. The snout is a brownish color. The forehead, cheeks, belly, and legs are white. Captive-bred hedgehogs are available in a variety of colors from the solid white albinos to the very dark, almost black-color varieties. When hedgehogs were first imported into the United States, the African pygmy hedgehog was documented as living as long as 8 to 10 years, but the average life of a pet hedgehog is 3 years.

## PLAN YOUR PROJECT

Use this idea starter AND publication 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide* as the starting place for your 4-H self-determined project. The *Self-Determined Project Guide* is available from your county OSU Extension office or on the Web at [ohio4h.org/selfdetermined](http://ohio4h.org/selfdetermined). You may choose to do a little or a lot depending on your level of interest. Be sure to register your project with your county OSU Extension office.

A hedgehog uses its spines in defense. A content hedgehog lays its spines back in the direction of its tail. If distressed, its spines become erect. The spines on its forehead become erect if the hedgehog is curious about something. If a hedgehog is in danger or becomes frightened, it will contract its strong *orbicularis* muscles on either side of its body to roll up into a ball. Hiding its head and legs, only its erect spines will show. Contact with the spines can be very painful.

In addition, hedgehogs will make hissing or grunting noises when threatened or agitated. On very rare occasions when extremely distressed, the hedgehog will let out a loud scream. When content, hedgehogs will make chirping and grunting sounds. Hoglets, or young hedgehogs, chirp and squeak when happy.

African pygmy hedgehogs have a keen sense of smell and hearing, but their sight is not as well developed because of their burrowing nature.



Baby hedgehogs are called hoglets. This hoglet is approximately five days old.



Characteristics of a healthy pet include bright eyes, a clear nose, and clean feet.

Thoroughly research this spiny creature and be certain you are committed to your animal's well-being before buying one. Hedgehogs like to live alone so if you decide to have one as a pet, purchase only one.

Wear rubber gloves when first handling your hedgehog. If frightened, the hedgehog will erect its spines and might prick you. Once your pet is accustomed to being handled while you wear rubber gloves, take one off and let it smell your bare hand. With time, you will be able to remove your other glove and handle your animal with bare hands.

It is important to purchase your hedgehog from a reputable source that provides additional care and handling instructions. The biggest reason for unhappy hedgehog owners is that their hedgehog never learns to relax and feel comfortable. It is very important that you feel comfortable handling your hedgehog before taking your hedgehog home.

### **AREAS OF INTEREST AND THINGS TO DO**

Every self-determined 4-H project can be broken down into areas of interest. These are the specific things members want to address during their project adventures. Using *4-H 365 Self-Determined Project Guide*, identify at least three areas of interest with at least three activities per area to explore. Take your ideas from the list below or make up your own.

#### **Selection**

- Since hedgehogs are considered exotic pets, research exotic pet laws in your state to make sure hedgehogs are legal to have as pets.
- Create a budget of expenses that you might incur as a result of keeping an African pygmy hedgehog as a pet. Research the cost of the hedgehog itself as well as costs related to its housing supplies, feed, and health care.
- Make a list of reputable breeders or pet stores that sell African pygmy hedgehogs.

- ❑ Look at several hedgehogs to see if you can correctly identify sows versus boars.
- ❑ Determine if you will select a younger hedgehog or a mature hedgehog. Create a list of pros and cons for each age.
- ❑ Learn the signs of an unhealthy hedgehog and make a list of them. Look for indications while selecting your African pygmy hedgehog.

### Proper Habitat

- ❑ Investigate and purchase appropriate housing for your hedgehog.
- ❑ Create a list of other items to add to the housing. Research which items are needed for a happy hedgehog.
- ❑ Purchase the appropriate items for feeding. Know the signs of your hedgehog when it's not eating and/or drinking properly. Research alternative methods of feeding and watering.
- ❑ Explore options for sleeping boxes. Find out the appropriate dimensions and conditions for ideal sleeping boxes.
- ❑ Research how much bedding will be needed for the housing space and sleeping box before buying what you need. What are the best options for bedding materials? Are they readily available in your area?
- ❑ Learn about the safest cleaning product options for your pet. Then, purchase them and create a schedule for cleaning.
- ❑ Explore the ideal environment for your African pygmy hedgehog. Create a list of how will you achieve these conditions.



Captive-bred hedgehogs in the United States are all considered African pygmy hedgehogs. A variety of colors and unique patterns is a result of years of selective breeding.

- ❑ African pygmy hedgehogs are nocturnal. Explore methods to train your hedgehog to your lifestyle. Describe your experience transitioning your hedgehog.
- ❑ Design an appropriate exercise space for your hedgehog. Create a poster or take pictures of the space. Include a list of obstacles that could endanger your hedgehog and how you will avoid them.

### Nutrition

- ❑ Research the types of foods hedgehogs need for a balanced diet. Not all commercial diets are ideal, so it is best to gather information from a reputable source for nutritional information. It is a good idea to supplement your pet's diet with mealworms and other appropriate treats.
- ❑ Look into any dietary requirements that may change as your hedgehog ages.
- ❑ Create a feeding schedule and keep it near your pet's cage. Make room on your chart for any change in the amount of food you give it.

- ❑ Track your hedgehog's weight weekly to see if it stays the same or changes.
- ❑ Experiment with different "treats" for your hedgehog. Document your pet's preferences of treats and how the treats affect its mood.

### Handling and Grooming

- ❑ Research how to properly handle a hedgehog so you and your pet enjoy your encounters.
- ❑ Keep a journal about how you bond with your new African pygmy hedgehog. List the activities in which you both take part, and describe your pet's attitude about its new surroundings. Start a timeline to document important events.
- ❑ Create a display that describes the signs of a relaxed or frightened hedgehog. Use pictures or drawings to provide visual cues.
- ❑ Explore when and how often hedgehogs need to be groomed and bathed. Describe possible issues that might arise while bathing. Describe your experience of bathing your hedgehog, if applicable.

## Health Care

- Document the medical records for your hedgehog. List visits to the veterinarian, diseases, treatments, and concerns about your hedgehog's health.
- Make a list of common diseases that typically affect hedgehogs along with their symptoms. Include internal as well as external diseases.
- Learn the external parts of your hedgehog. This will help you communicate with a veterinarian or someone else when you discuss your pet.
- Document some of the signs of an unhealthy hedgehog so you can be on the alert in case you see any deviation from the norm for your pet.
- Research the two basic categories of communicable and noncommunicable diseases.

## SOURCE

Miller, Lucinda, and William Stanforth. *Small Animals Resource Handbook*. The Ohio State University, 2005.

## RELATED RESOURCES

Dick, Gail. Owner and Professional Hedgehog Breeder, Millermeade Farm's Critter Connection, [critterconnection.cc](http://critterconnection.cc).

Gagne, Tammy. *Care for a Pet Hedgehog*. Hockessin, DE: Mitchell Lane Publishers, 2010.

Vanderlip, Sharon Lynn. *Hedgehogs: Everything About Purchase, Care, and Nutrition*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 2010.

[ohio4h.org/selfdetermined](http://ohio4h.org/selfdetermined)



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