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World of Wonder

EXPLORING THE REALMS OF HISTORY, SCIENCE, NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY
By Laurie Triefeldt

European Hedgehogs are found in woodlands, farmlands and suburban areas throughout Europe. They are sometimes seen rooting around in gardens.

HEDGEHOGS

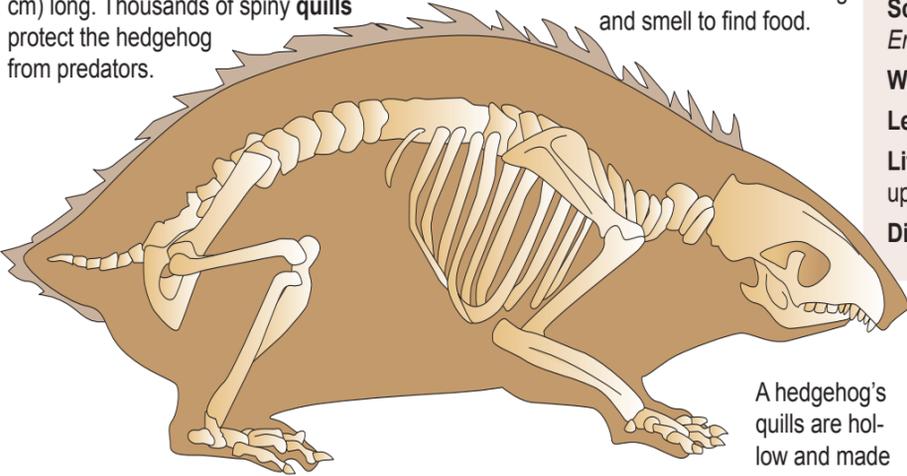


This mammal is about the size of a small rabbit. Covered in short, sharp spines, the solitary hedgehog has become a popular pet in some parts of the world. 17 species of hedgehog can be found in Europe, Asia and Africa.



Anatomy 101

Hedgehogs grow to about 9 inches (23 cm) long. Thousands of spiny quills protect the hedgehog from predators.



Hedgehogs have very poor eyesight. They rely on their senses of hearing and smell to find food.

Quick facts

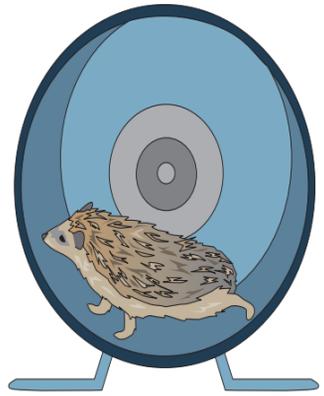
- Scientific name:** *Erinaceus europaeus*
- Weight:** 1 to 2 lb. (400 to 1,000 g)
- Length:** 7 to 9 in. (16 to 35 cm)
- Life span:** 4 to 7 years in the wild, or up to 10 years in captivity
- Diet:** Insectivorous/Omnivorous

In a word

Hedgehogs are sometimes called pincushions with legs. They like to root around in hedges and undergrowth while snorting and grunting much like a pig or hog — which is why they are called hedgehogs.

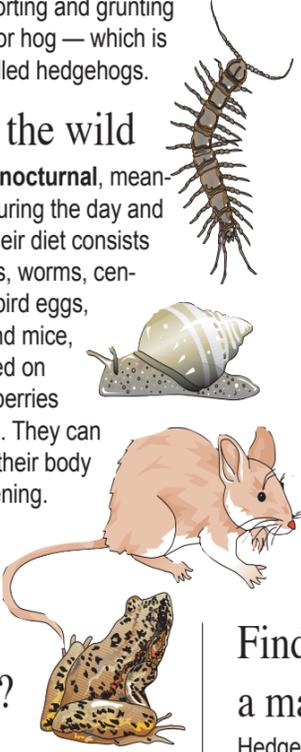
The hedgehog has two large muscles that run down its back and are used to control its quills. When threatened or frightened, the hedgehog rolls itself into a prickly ball.

A hedgehog's quills are hollow and made of keratin, similar to human fingernails.



Dinner in the wild

Hedgehogs are nocturnal, meaning they sleep during the day and hunt at night. Their diet consists largely of insects, worms, centipedes, snails, bird eggs, frogs, snakes and mice, but they also feed on roots, grasses, berries and mushrooms. They can eat one-third of their body weight in an evening.



Pygmy hedgehogs

The African pygmy hedgehog is a domestic hybrid combination of the white-bellied hedgehog and the Algerian hedgehog. It was bred to be smaller and tamer than its wild cousins. This little critter weighs in at 1 to 1.5 pounds (0.5 to 0.7 kg) and grows to 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 cm) long.



Pygmy hedgehog

Life as a pet

Hedgehogs are easily tamed, and some people keep them as useful pets, relying on them to get rid of insects and other pests. Owing a hedgehog is restricted in some places, so you need to make sure they are legal to own where you live. Also, hedgehogs live a long time and require special care; adopting one as a pet should be carefully considered as a long-term commitment.

A pet hedgehog should always be treated gently, as a frightened hedgehog will roll into a ball and deploy its sharp quills — ouch!

Hedgehogs need a large, clean cage, at least 4 square feet (0.37 square meters). Choose one without wire, as little hedgehog feet can get stuck in wire spaces. They also need a lot of exercise, so a running wheel is a must — remember to choose a solid one, not a wire one.

One of the most challenging aspects of keeping a pet hedgehog is making sure it gets a proper diet. Pet hedgehogs can be fed dry cat food, ferret food and cooked chicken. As a treat once or twice a week, you can feed your hedgehog mealworms, crickets, fruit or vegetables. And, of course, your hedgehog needs a fresh and plentiful source of water.

SOURCES: *World Book Encyclopedia*, World Book Inc.; <http://hedgehogheadquarters.com>; nationalgeographic.com; sandiegozoo.org; <http://www.onekind.org>

Where in the world?

Hedgehogs are related to moles and shrews. They are native to Asia, Europe and Africa, and have been introduced in New Zealand. They live in many kinds of habitats, thriving in forests, deserts, savannas, scrublands and suburban gardens.

Hedgehogs hibernate in cold weather. In deserts, they sleep through heat in a process called estivation. They are active all year round in temperate climates.

Dangers

Large birds and carnivores like the badger are the hedgehog's greatest enemies. Humans are also a threat to hedgehogs, as construction and agricultural activities often push hedgehogs out of their natural habitats.

Finding a mate

Hedgehogs prefer to live alone and usually get together with other hedgehogs only when it's time to mate. Young are born 35 to 58 days after mating, depending on the species. Litters range in size from one to 11 babies, but three to four is average. Hedgehogs are born blind, with a membrane over their quills. The quills sprout two or three days after birth. Baby hedgehog spines eventually fall out and are replaced with adult spines. This is called "quilling." Young hedgehogs leave the nest four to seven weeks after being born and are able to mate at about 10 weeks old.



Did you know?

- Hedgehogs have 5,000 to 6,500 quills.
- A hedgehog's home range is 120 yards from its nest.
- Hedgehogs share distant ancestry with shrews.
- When stimulated by a strong smell or taste, hedgehogs will self-anoint — this means they cover their prickles in foamy saliva. Why they do this is not known.
- Unlike the porcupine's quills, hedgehog quills are not barbed. Like porcupines, hedgehogs do shed sometimes.
- Hedgehogs chirp, hiss and growl if frightened or angry.

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