

Tiggywinkles Fact Sheets

Overwintering Hedgehogs

Most British winters follow a similar pattern of alternating periods of cold and mild conditions, plus the occasional really cold spell. Consequently, hedgehogs follow a pattern of hibernation techniques that have not changed for centuries. Basically, at any time from late November onwards, with the majority after Christmas, fit mature hedgehogs will construct a hibernaculum, (a hibernation nest) where they will more or less stay until March. Nobody can decide what prompts a hedgehog to hibernate, but it may be a combination of day length, cold weather and shortage of food.

If the nest is badly constructed the hedgehog may change sites in very cold weather and build a fresh nest elsewhere. This will also happen if the nest is flooded. The hedgehog will also make the occasional nightly foray to feed. So don't worry if you see one out occasionally in the evening.

Any hedgehog found in a definite nest should be left well alone, no matter what the prevailing weather conditions. To wake a hedgehog up uses much of its fat reserves which may prevent it being able to wake after a further period of hibernation.

If a hedgehog is found sleeping out in the open, away from the nest, it is not hibernating and is probably suffering from hypothermia and in need of attention. Take it indoors - an outbuilding is not warm enough - place it on a towel-wrapped warm hot water bottle and wait for it to stir. If it doesn't it may have died, but it's worth checking. Medical assistance can be given by a local wildlife rescue centre, with the direction of a sympathetic vet. Hartmanns fluids, warmed, can be given under the skin and dexamethasone injected to improve circulation, along with covering antibiotics.

When the hedgehog shows movement it should be offered Lectade (Pfizer) to drink or Dioralyte. This is available from vets. No solid food should be given for 12 hours, after which a liquid food, like Ensure or Complan, can be offered. Tinned dog food can be given after 24 hours.

Never give bread or milk.

Any rescued hedgehog should be kept in captivity and warmth until at least April. It should not be released until warmer weather and can be prevented from hibernating by keeping it at an ambient temperature of 65°F. It does not need to hibernate. When keeping hedgehogs for the winter, they need an easily cleaned area lined with newspaper and a towel.

They should be fed on one third of a normal sized tin of dog or cat food each day, with a small sprinkle of dried cat food added for crunchiness. They should also have a constant supply of water.

Release should be in a garden, with access to at least nine other gardens and with a hedgehog box as a base. Make sure there are no known badger setts or main roads in the immediate area.

Juveniles

It has been estimated that a hedgehog needs to weigh 600 grams to survive the rigours of hibernation. Many youngsters are born late in the year and have no hope of making the weight before the onset of winter.

From the end of September onwards any small hedgehog you come across should be weighed. Any bordering on 600 grams can be fattened up on tinned dog food and released before the end of October, if it makes the required weight. Smaller hedgehogs should be kept warm indoors so they stay awake, until the following Spring when they can be prepared for release back to the wild.

Lungworm

Most hedgehogs, particularly in the Autumn and Winter, are affected by parasites (worms) in their lungs. These can cause breathing problems and in cases of severe infestation can prove fatal. Tiggywinkles have developed a medical treatment regime which effectively eradicates the problem. Your vet can contact us for details.

Injuries

Obviously any hedgehog that is injured during the winter should be given treatment and kept warm and awake until April, at the earliest, or when the danger of frost has passed (earlier in Devon than in Scotland!), when it should be released so long as it has recovered from its injuries.



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