

Feeding Wild Hedgehogs

We are often asked for advice regarding the best food for feeding wild hedgehogs living in, or visiting people's gardens.

'Never cow's milk!' is usually our first response, followed by an explanation of what constitutes a healthy supplementary diet for their spiky nocturnal visitors. Proprietary hedgehog foods are available but can be expensive (and some may even contain inappropriate ingredients), so we always recommend feeding meaty cat or dog food, some crunchy 'cat complete' biscuits and to ensure that fresh water is always available. Often this advice will be met with statements such as 'but my hedgehogs will only eat xxxxxx' or 'I've been told not to feed them xxxxxx', so we will try to dispel a few of the myths for you all...

Statement - 'You shouldn't feed hedgehogs fish flavoured cat food'.

False – Whilst some hedgehogs do not find fish flavoured food particularly palatable, there is no nutritional difference between fish flavoured food and any other flavour. At Vale Wildlife Hospital we mix all different flavours together to reduce the chance of individuals favouring certain flavours or varieties.

Statement – 'Cat or dog food in gravy is unsuitable to feed to hedgehogs'

False – Again, nutritionally there will be no difference between the varieties of tinned food whether it is in jelly, gravy or 'loaf' form. Stomach upsets can occur for a multitude of reasons in hedgehogs (they have a very fast metabolism anyway) and it highly unlikely that gravy or jelly will be the cause of any such problems. (Remember, these are wild animals that will scavenge carrion if the opportunity arises!)

Statement – 'My' hedgehog will only eat mealworms'

False – Remove the mealworms and provide a more nutritionally balanced alternative. If the hedgehog is hungry it will eat whatever food is provided!

Whilst hedgehogs will often favour mealworms over other food, pandering to this extremely unhealthy fixation is much the same as allowing a petulant child to eat only chocolate. Mealworms have an extremely poor calcium/phosphorus ratio which can cause life threatening problems if eaten as a dietary staple. Calcium is an essential mineral for the formation of healthy bones. Phosphorus is also an essential mineral which plays an important role in the health of the kidneys, bones, muscles, blood vessels and keeping of a regular heartbeat. When calcium and phosphorus ratios are correct both minerals are able to perform their vital functions.

If phosphorus levels in food are consistently higher than the calcium content this can result in the body leaching calcium, which is stored in the bones into the bloodstream to counteract the discrepancy. The resulting calcium deficiency within the bones causes them to become misshapen, bendy or brittle, consequently causing painful deformities and fractures. This is known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD) or hyperparathyroidism. Young hedgehogs fed on a diet with the incorrect calcium/phosphorus ratio are particularly at risk and are unlikely to live to be healthy adults.

To see a video showing the plight of a young hedgehog suffering from MBD you can visit our website

www.valewildlife.org.uk/rehabbers-area/ or 'YouTube' at <https://youtu.be/kZ7Y3a4vggU>.

The healthy ratio of calcium to phosphorus is considered to be 1:1 or 1:2. The following table highlights the actual ratios of foodstuffs currently being fed to hedgehogs.

Food	Calcium	Phosphorus	Additional Info.
Puppy Food	1.5	1.1	Slightly increased calcium is good for bone development in young animals.
Branded cat food	1	2	Some cat foods have ratios as high as 1:4 – it's always worth doing your research!
Raw Beef 'chuck'	1	9	Organs, Eg. Offal are even higher in phosphorus
Raw Chicken breast	1	18	Organs, Eg. Offal are even higher in phosphorus
Mealworms	1	20	Calcium/Phosphorus ratio ranges of 1:7 - 1:33 have been recorded dependant on form.
Peanuts	1	6	
Sunflower hearts	1	7	

Much the same as when considering our own diets, 'everything in moderation' is the key to providing a healthy and balanced diet for wild-living hedgehogs. Small amounts of high phosphorus foods that hedgehogs scavenge from around bird tables are unlikely to cause major problems when eaten in conjunction with foods with a balanced calcium/phosphorus ratio.

Hedgehogs may travel up to 2 miles in a night and may visit several gardens for food, often visiting the same gardens at roughly the same time each night. Consideration should be given to the foods that your neighbours may be putting out for the hedgehogs. If they are routinely feeding high phosphorus foods, the small amount of mealworms, sunflower seeds or peanuts that you are providing could be the difference between a healthy diet and a lethal dose of phosphorus. It should always be remembered that when feeding hedgehogs the aim is to supplement their natural diets, the intention should not be to replace their natural diet entirely.

If you have concerns about a hedgehog in your garden please call Vale Wildlife Hospital on (01386) 882288

References

British Hedgehog Preservation Society (2015) *I would like a hedgehog for my garden - where can I get one?*

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