

Hedgehogs



The hedgehog is one of our most distinctive and best-loved animals. Its most famous feature is its spines, which cover most of its body.



Hedgehogs are nocturnal, which means they are most active during the night. They live in parks, countryside and gardens all over the country.

The number of hedgehogs in Ireland is falling, and no one knows exactly why. Because of this, hedgehogs are now protected by law.

Famous hedgehog in fiction

The world's most famous hedgehog is probably Mrs Tiggly-Winkle from *The Tale of Mrs Tiggly-Winkle*, the children's book written by Beatrix Potter.

There was once a little girl called Lucie, who was always losing her handkerchiefs. When she started looking for them she came across Mrs Tiggly-Winkle - a hedgehog washerwoman who did the laundry for all the other animals!



Animal detectives - hunting for hedgehogs in your neighbourhood

If you find either of these clues in your local area, it's likely that hedgehogs are nearby...

Droppings: Hedgehog droppings are smaller than fox droppings, and

are often found on garden lawns. They are usually black, and sometimes have bits of beetles and other insects in them.

Noise! When they are eating or mating, hedgehogs can be noisy little creatures, making snuffling and chomping sounds. Stand in your garden at night, and see if you can hear them!

Here are ten things you might not know about our spiky little friends:

- 1 Hedgehogs are carnivores, which means they eat the flesh of other animals. They like slugs, snails, worms, beetles and other insects, but they will also eat everything from frogs to birds' eggs!
- 2 Hedgehogs are the Ireland's only spiny mammal. They use their spines to protect themselves from predators, and roll into a tight ball when they feel threatened.
- 3 An average hedgehog has between 5,000 and 6,000 spines. Each one will grow to about an inch long. After about a year, old spines will fall out and be replaced by new ones.
- 4 Hedgehog spines are in fact very strong, modified hairs. They are made of a protein called keratin, which is what your fingernails are made of!
- 5 Hedgehogs hibernate, which means they make a nest and go into a deep sleep during the winter. They wouldn't be able to survive the cold weather otherwise, because there aren't enough insects around for them to eat.
- 6 Hedgehogs breed between April and September. Female hedgehogs will be pregnant for about four and a half weeks before giving birth, and they usually have between two and six babies.
- 7 Baby hedgehogs are born blind, and without any visible spines. This is so they don't hurt their mum when she gives birth to them! Their first spines come through in about an hour. After about two weeks, their spines will become more adult-like, and their eyes will open.
- 8 Hedgehogs may be small, but they can cover big distances. Males usually walk further than females, sometimes trotting several miles in a night.
- 9 Smell is a hedgehog's most important sense. It uses its nose to find food, avoid danger and identify other hedgehogs. In contrast, hedgehogs' eyesight is actually quite weak.
- 10 In the wild, the average hedgehog lives about three years. Many of the dangers hedgehogs face have been created by humans, including cars, bonfires, lawnmowers, slug pellets and drains. They need all the help they can get!

