

## Care guide

Pillbug, *Armadillidium vulgare*



This species was introduced into Australia from Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is now a common resident in gardens and disturbed areas of south eastern Australia. They are crustaceans with seven pairs of legs; one pair coming off each of the first seven segments of their body. The smaller segments near the tail don't have legs, but have shorter limbs that act as lungs. For these to work properly (and for pillbugs to survive) they must remain in a moist environment, and for this reason usually confined to damp habitats. They are generally nocturnal and live beneath rocks, logs and within compost, where they feed upon algae, wood, leaves and a wide variety of decaying material.

They are remarkable little animals and they have an exceptional defence; the ability to roll up into a tight ball. In this case their armoured body plates overlap and make them quite impenetrable to many small predators.

Like many other invertebrates, pillbugs shed their outer skeleton (exoskeleton) in order to grow, and do so a number of times to reach adult size. Individuals may live for two or three years, and females can have hundreds of offspring in that time. They breed when conditions are favourable, usually during summer, but may breed at other times also. A large number of eggs are carried in a special pocket on the underside of the female's body called the marsupium. The eggs remain here until they hatch into small white offspring. Young pillbugs are fully mobile and able to feed themselves soon after leaving their mother.

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**Food:** Vegetable scraps, leaf litter and other household compost. Minibeast Wildlife Orthopteran food. Keep in mind that they are quite small animals and do not require large volumes of food.

**Water:** Mist spray the substrate once a day. This will keep the enclosure damp, and the pillbugs will drink from the moisture in the ground. Ensure that the moisture does not become excessive (ie sodden or water logged).

**Enclosure:** The enclosure needs to be about 10 cm H x 20 cm W x 20 cm L. Place the enclosure in a spot exposed to some daylight each day, but be careful it does not over heat or dry out in direct sunlight. The base of the enclosure should be covered in a substrate of either soil or coco-peat (available from garden supply shops) to a depth of 5cm. One end of this substrate always needs to be kept damp. You may place on object such as a piece of bark in the enclosure for the pillbugs to shelter under, or shallow layer of leaf litter. They will also dig into the ground to shelter.

**Life span:** 2-3 years.

**Handling:** Pillbugs are totally harmless and can be handled safely. They should be picked up gently by their bodies, and carefully placed on the hand. Always wash your hands after handling animals.

**Reproduction:** Reproductive behaviour is not usually seen, but males will mate by crawling obliquely across the females back. Eggs are laid into the female's ventral pouch (the marsupium), and hatch several days later. The white young emerge with initially only 6 pairs of legs, but develop the 7<sup>th</sup> after their first moult.

**Common issues:** Dehydration is the most common issue facing pillbugs in captivity. This can be avoided easily by keeping the substrate (soil or coco-peat) moist at all times.

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