



# DEGU CARE

## BACKGROUND

**Average Size:** body length is around 5-7 inches, tail length is 5-6 inches

**Average Lifespan:** 5-8 years

In the wild, degus are very social creatures. They live in colonies in an elaborate system of burrows. If handled and raised from an early age, degus can be social with their human caretakers but they do need a lot of attention and will need constant companionship. Because of this, it is always strongly recommended to have at least 2 degus at a time. Degus tend to be playful, intelligent and very curious. They are able to recognize their owner's and communicate with about 15 different sounds.

## COST

When you first get your degu, you'll need to spend about \$150 for a good cage. Food, hay, bathing dust and bedding runs about \$200 a year and toys and treats generally run about \$180 annually.

## DIET

- High quality commercial chinchilla chow should be available to your degu at all times. It should be in pellet form and contain 16 - 20 percent protein, 2 - 5 percent fat and in the range 15 - 35 percent fiber. It's a good idea to avoid formulas that contain corn in the first few ingredients as it can be hard on your degu's digestive track.
- Putting your degu's food in a food hopper or a heavy ceramic dish can help keep it from getting soiled or knocked over. Make sure to check the bowl daily for fecal pellets and urine and remember to throw away any food that has been contaminated.
- Even with pelleted food there should be hay available at all times. Timothy hay is an excellent source of fiber and should make up the bulk of hay you feed your degu.
- Your degu's hay should be changed every day to keep it from becoming soiled or moldy. Hay should be available through a hay rack mounted to the side of your degu's cage, or it can be made available on an upper shelf in their cage. It should never be placed on the ground.
  - You should never feed your degu hay that is damp, smells musty or is discolored.
- Degus are prone to diabetes and are designed to eat a diet high in fiber and low in carbohydrates. Don't let your degu get overweight or obese as it can negatively impact their health. Fruit should be avoided as a treat (including raisins) due to the high sugar content.
- Your degu can have treats but they should be few and far between. They should also be only offered in small quantities or they may cause diarrhea.
  - **Recommended:** Organic carrots, sweet potato (peeled, uncooked), carrots, broccoli, leafy greens, green beans, and dandelion leaves (*must* be pesticide-free)
  - **Avoid:** fruit, sunflower seeds, peanuts, corn, vegetables that are members of the cabbage family (cabbage, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, and kale) and anything that's old or spoiled
- Fresh, clean water should be available 24/7. A water bottle with a drinking tube that attaches to the cage is the best way to go. Using filtered water is highly recommended as some of the minerals found in tap water can be harmful to their health.

- Check with your vet if you are unsure about anything you are feeding your degu.

## HYGIENE AND BEHAVIOR

- Unlike most mammals, the degu does not bathe in water. Instead, they take dust baths. Chinchilla bathing dust is ideal and can usually be purchased at your local pet shop.
- To give your degu a dust bath: place a deep bowl containing a small amount of the dust in your pet's cage 3 - 5 times a week. Then sit back and watch as your degu rolls, flips, and plays in the dust! It is always best to remove the dusting container immediately after a bath to prevent the dust from being soiled with feces, food, or bedding.
- Degus are part of a group of rodents that produce cecotropes. Cecotropes are nutrient-rich and are passed out of the body like feces. They are then re-ingested by the chinchilla so the nutrients can be absorbed. Cecotropes have twice the protein and half of the fiber that typical feces have. This is an important part of the proper digestive function and nutrition of degus, so don't worry if you see your pet doing this.
- Degus have teeth that are naturally dark orange and they grow continuously throughout their lives. The natural grinding action of chewing on toys, hay and other food items, generally causes the teeth to stay at an ideal length. You may need to take your degu in to get their teeth manually cut if their teeth don't wear down naturally.
  - **Important Note about Degu Tails:** *never grab or try to pick up a degu by the tail or ears. They can easily lose part of their tail and have a messy injury as a result. Shedding their tail is probably a natural defense of wild degus to escape if caught by the tail.*

## CAGE & ENVIRONMENT

- The minimum size cage you should have for 2 degus is 24" wide, 18" deep and 24" tall. However it's always recommended to get the largest style you can afford.
- Multilevel wire chinchilla cages or ferret cages are ideal as they give your degus plenty of room to eat, sleep and run around. Cover or avoid plastic bases as they can be chewed through remarkably quickly.
- Shelves and ledges should have solid surfaces since degus are prone to foot problems.
- Make sure the bottom of the cage has at least 2 inches of Carefresh bedding.
- Provide nesting materials for your degu to build with. Some great materials to give them are tissues, paper towels and shredded paper.
- A good cage should have at least a nest box (a wooden box about 6 by 8 by 6 inches) and another hut to play and sleep in.
- Keep the cage indoors, away from direct sunlight and drafts. Never allow the habitat temperature to rise above 80 degrees or below 50 degrees as this could seriously affect your degu's health as they are very sensitive to temperatures.

## DAILY CARE

- Remove all stale food then wash and refill food bowl.
- Clean and refill water bottle.
- Provide fresh hay for your degu daily.
- Clean cage completely once a week by replacing dirty bedding and scrubbing down the cage with a mixture of warm water and vinegar.



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## EXERCISE & TOYS

- If your degu has been properly tamed and trained, they'll need at least a half an hour of exercise out of the cage in a safe, enclosed room every day. Your degus will get the most out of their exercise/play times if you let them out in the morning and evening, to correspond with their peak activity levels.
- Degu-proofing a room is necessary before letting them run around. They can squeeze into very small spaces so make sure to check the room for ways that they might get trapped, injured, or escape. A tiled surface, such as a bathroom, tends to be a good area for playtime. Be sure to stay in the room with your degu as they will chew on woodwork, power cords or anything else they find.
- Since degus are such determined chewers, it is vital to provide them with lots of opportunities to chew. A variety of wood blocks and chews as well as branches can be provided.
- Thick branches and twigs can be added to the cage and will offer both exercise (climbing) and chewing opportunities. Make sure the branches come from non-toxic wood. Some woods that are safe for you to give to your degu can come from apple trees, pear trees and grape vines. Before you give your degu any branches or twigs make sure they have not been treated with pesticides. If you decide to branch out and get your degu any other type of wood make sure to do your research as some types can be very harmful to them.
- A mineral or salt block designed for rodents can be attached to the cage.

- An exercise wheel should be provided for your degu (11 inches tends to be a good size). The flying saucer model attaches to your degu's cage wall and provides plenty of room for them to run. Whatever you get make sure that the running surface is flat and solid so their nails and toes don't get caught.
- Willow balls and toys made for rabbits are great for degus and cotton rope and wood toys designed for large parrots are also a good choice.
- Tunnels can provide endless entertainment for your degus. You can make some out of pvc pipes or terracotta chimney liners.
- Check with your vet if you are unsure about anything you are giving your degu.

## SIGNS OF ILLNESS

- Bring your degu to the veterinarian annually for check-ups but don't wait for your yearly appointment if you think one of your degus is sick—seek help immediately. Common signs that something isn't right include watery eyes, nasal discharge or wheezing, pawing at mouth, constantly attending a particular body area, agitated behavior or complete disinterest, red and warm ears, drooling or wet chin/chest area and less/more food or water consumption.
- Degus are also prone to contracting diabetes. This can be caused by certain viruses, or a high blood sugar level as a result of eating sugar rich food. There is no treatment for diabetic degus so it is best to avoid sugary foods and feed them a diet that has no added sugars.

## Degu Supply Checklist

- Well-constructed chinchilla or ferret cage, at least 24" wide, 18" deep and 24" tall (make sure to include a few shelves at varying heights for your degu to explore on)
- Carefresh bedding
- Chinchilla Chow - pellet form
- A small food hopper or heavy ceramic dish
- Attachable water bottle with drinking tube
- Hay rack
- Timothy hay
- Dust bin and chinchilla dust for bathing
- Rabbit or parrot safe toys (lots of 'em!)
- Large flat and solid exercise wheel (No mesh or wire rungs!)
- Nesting box *and* hiding hut
- Chew proof toys
- Untreated wooden toys for chewing and wearing down a degu's ever-growing teeth