

Degu - Facts & Care Sheet

Degus are great pets for older children and adults. Friendly and inquisitive they are easy to look after. Degus are very intelligent and love to play and explore with lots of attention they can become very tame. The life span of a degu is between six and eight years.

Sociable creatures

Degus thrive in same-sex pairs or groups. They tend to be happier and healthier when kept together, and this way they have a play mate and someone to snuggle up with to sleep! Degus' should be bought together if they are to live together, so they are already friends. It can be very hard to introduce them later in life.

What kind of home do they need?

Degus love to chew everything. They are part of the rodent family therefore, it's essential that you buy an appropriate cage from which they can't escape. A good choice is a wire cage but it's important that it has a solid (rather than mesh) base to prevent your pets developing problems with their paws. You could, as an alternative keep your degus in a large gerbilarium or even in a fish tank with a suitable top.

Degus like to climb and are generally very active. They need plenty of space to exercise. Ideally, their cage should have several levels or shelves as degus love to bound around from one level to another! The cage should be kept out of direct sunlight and damp spots and away from anything which may cause rapid temperature fluctuations for example radiators or draughts. Degus don't like high temperatures so don't keep them in an overly warm room.

A large wooden nesting box full of hay should be provided for them to sleep in. Gnawing blocks and clean branches from stone-less fruit trees such as the apple will provide entertainment. Cuttlebone provides calcium and is great for chewing on.

What to feed me

There are a few specific diets for degus but guinea pig nuggets (not muesli) are recommended for your pets. It's important to feed them what they're used to as this will help to prevent stress caused by changing their food at the same time as their surroundings. Good quality hay, such as Timothy hay, should always be available as should fresh water in a sturdy bottle.

Never feed your pets foods that are high in fat or contain sugar (sucrose, glucose, fructose) or honey as this can cause diabetes and will make them very ill. Fresh (not dried) fruits in very small quantities make ideal treats. Vitamin supplements are useful to ensure your degus remain in optimum health and mineral treats are also popular. You'll need to make sure a sturdy feeding bowl is available that is hard to tip over, such as a heavy earthenware or stainless steel bowl. Remove uneaten food daily and ensure the food bowl and bottle are cleaned and refilled daily.



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Enrichment

Always keep more than one degu in a cage to provide companionship. Your pets' lives can be enriched by providing them with toys and stimulating natural behaviour. For example, hiding treats around the cage keeps them amused and stimulates natural feeding. Branches, shelves, different levels and tubes provide hideaway holes for food similar to those they'd find in the wild. It's important to replace their toys and rearrange the contents of their cage regularly to stop them from becoming bored.

Degus move very quickly so time spent outside the cage should be carefully supervised and built up slowly. Do not allow them out in your kitchen or bathroom as there are many hazards and they may chew on electrical cables. A small pet playpen is useful. Many parrot toys are excellent for degus especially if they're wooden and chewable! A large runner ball is ideal for burning off energy and you won't have to worry about your pet escaping.

How to handle me

Allow your degus a few days to get used to their new surroundings, When you take them home, without being disturbed. You should then start talking to them quietly so that they get used to your voice. Next, introduce your hand into their cage slowly and perhaps offer a treat. Once they're comfortable with you, you can pick them up. Hold your pet facing you, close to your chest you with one hand over its back and the other hand supporting its bottom. It's important that you handle your pets regularly to develop their confidence and maintain your relationship with them. Degus do wriggle a lot but once they're at ease with you, they may sit on you and allow you to stroke them.

Never pick a degu up by its tail. This could harm your pet and is very painful.

Personal Hygiene

Degus are usually very clean creatures. Your degus' cage and toys should be thoroughly cleaned at least once a week using a pet safe disinfectant.

Health and Fitness

Degus are usually problem free given the correct care and attention. As with all animals the emphasis should be on maintaining clean and hygienic conditions and correct feeding regimes.

Like all rodents your degus' teeth are constantly growing and it is important to provide him with wooden toys, mineral stones or treats to gnaw on or the teeth can become overgrown, requiring veterinary treatment.

Several times a week a dust bath filled with chinchilla sand should be placed in the cage so it may be used as a bath. This stimulates grooming, keeping the coat clean and shiny. Dust baths should be removed after about half an hour, to prevent them becoming soiled. Light grooming with a rabbit brush will help to build up their trust in you.