

DEGU



Degu care

The degu is native to central and northern Chile, where they live in large groups. In the wild they live in elaborate burrows amongst the rocks and brush of the West Andean slopes. The females raise their young in a communal group and, to be healthy and happy, degus should be kept as pets in pairs or groups. As pets, they typically live 5-8 years.

Degus prefer temperatures below 70 degrees, and *require* air-conditioning in the summer. If they are kept in a room above 72-74 degrees, they can get heatstroke and die.

Your degu needs weekly dust baths to keep their fur in good shape. Degus use chinchilla bath dust to clean their fur. Your degu should get dust baths at least twice a week.

Personality

Degus can become very tame if handled regularly and from an early age. They are playful and curious creatures and, like most rodents, love to chew everything. They thrive on social interaction and activity. Without regular social interaction and opportunities for exercise they can become aggressive and neurotic. A degu spends its days digging tunnels and burrowing, so will need a large enclosure with adequate bedding that allows this activity.

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While degus are relatively quiet critters, they do sometimes whistle or make quiet warbling sounds when they groom each other.

Medical needs

Degus should have yellow-orange teeth. If your degu is young, it may not yet have this tooth coloration yet, but an adult degu (over 8 months) should have this coloration. If the teeth are white or a very light yellow after the degu is 8 months old, the degu may be lacking in calcium. A flavored Tums chew or part of a cuttlebone (sold in the bird section of pet stores) may help remedy this problem.

Degus are generally healthy animals, but they can get sick. Signs of illness include diarrhea, soft stools, constipation, seizures, weakness, weepy eyes, a change in eating habits, a change in personality, drooling, pawing at the mouth, or leaning the head to one side constantly.

With degus being unable to metabolize sugar, diabetes is a concern. This can be prevented, however, by offering them degu-specific food and not giving foods high in sugar. If your degu is suddenly drinking a lot of water, contact your veterinarian.

Overweight degus have a higher risk of developing liver issues. Females in particular have an increased risk when they become of breeding age. Avoid feeding your degu fatty foods such as sunflower seeds and nuts.

Degus are also susceptible to ear mites. If you notice excessive itching or scratching at the ears, contact your veterinarian.

Cataracts are a genetic problem degus are susceptible to at any age. Contact your veterinarian should you notice any eye discharge or cloudiness.

Diet

Degus should be fed a specially pelleted degu diet or a mix of 50% guinea pig pellets and 50% chinchilla pellets. Grass hay should always be available. Degus do tend to bury their food.

The diet of a degu should be low in sugars, carbohydrates and fats. Degus are unable to metabolize sugar, so be especially careful to avoid treats with sugar, including fresh or dried fruit. Rodent mixtures consisting of corn, cereals, sunflower seeds, raisins or dried fruit should not be fed to degus.

Clean, fresh water should be available at all times. Use an inverted bottle with a drinking tube that can be attached to the cage. Change water daily.

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Housing

Degus require a large amount of space and should be kept in a big multi-level cage similar to those made for ferrets or chinchillas. The cage should have a solid floor. Provide a sufficient amount of bedding that will allow for digging and stockpiling of food. A solid (no rungs) exercise wheel, tubes or PVC pipes for tunnels are important cage furnishing to address degus' natural activities and exercise needs.

Bedding should consist of a recycled paper bedding as well as hay. Your degu will eat some of the hay and use some for building a nest. Make sure to avoid cedar and pine shavings as these woods are harmful to degus. You will also want to include a flat-topped nest box or igloo. This gives degus a sense of security and, since they like to climb, the box also gives them another place to climb up and sit. Clean, untreated branches from fruit trees put in the cage can also create climbing opportunities and entertainment.

Degus are determined chewers and need plenty of opportunities to chew. Untreated, unpainted wood block or commercially produced wood chews made for rabbits work well for degus.

Like chinchillas, degus need regular dust baths. Provide a shallow bowl of chinchilla dust a couple times a week. They will typically only need it for 20-30 minutes and then you can remove it.

Keep the cage away from direct sunlight, drafts and other pets such as dogs and cats.

Handling your degu

Start by hand feeding the degu small treats. When they seem comfortable taking treats, scoop them up with both hands, being sure to support their bottom. Handle them regularly to develop their confidence. Once at ease they may learn to climb in your hand when you reach into the cage. Degus move very quickly so when carried or held be careful to keep them secured. Never try to catch a degu by grabbing its tail. As a natural defense against predators, the tail sheds easily but doesn't grow back.

For time outside the cage, a large runner ball can be ideal for burning off energy.

Playtime and exercise

Pairs or groups should be same-sex. It is not recommended that males and females be kept together as degus are prolific breeders and breeding shortens the life span of females.