

Degu Care



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Degus are small rodents. They are often gentle if handled frequently and unlike some rodents, are active chiefly in the daytime. They are intelligent and playful, and in the right situation, can be affectionate pets. They are playful and have been described as having a "bubbly" personality. They are highly social creatures and are best kept in small groups rather than singly.

Unlike rats and mice, their tails are haired, making them more popular with those who do not care for hairless tails. Degus have an unusually long lifespan for rodents, commonly living for 6-8 years and as long as 13 years has been reported.



Photos courtesy of Depositphotos

Parents should determine if their children are old or gentle enough to handle a nearly 3-ounce (80 grams) agile pet without unintentionally harming the animal.

The downside of degus as pets is their predisposition to chewing. Much like chinchillas, they will chew on anything they have access to, and although the damage from this can be minimized by providing a lot of acceptable chewing materials, you can bet that a loose degu will chew on whatever seems like fun.

They have excellent hearing and sense of smell, but also have poor eyesight and are therefore prone to falling from ledges if left unattended.

Cages should be large and well ventilated. Since degus love to chew, plastic substrate is generally short lived. Wire caging with bars no wider than 2 cm is best. A pair of degus should be housed in nothing smaller than a 35-inch X 50-inch X 23-inch enclosure with room to play, climb, and sleep. Nest boxes are preferred sleeping areas.

Torn paper towels are often prized bedding material, and it is inexpensive and easy to replace if it becomes soiled. Since degus are burrowing animals, bedding should be deep and absorbent, but not with wood-based materials. Recycled paper products, such as Carefresh brand bedding, is ideal. Scooping out waste materials daily and changing the entire cage weekly will keep the environment healthy and minimize odors.

As playful and intelligent creatures, they need items for environmental enrichment such as solid wheels (wire wheels can result in long bone fractures), and toilet tissue rolls for exploration. Sisal rope climbs are favorites. Like chinchillas, degus need regular dust bathing to maintain a healthy coat. Dust baths should be provided several times per week, and a standard chinchilla dust may be used.

Chew toys, such as wood from edible trees (particularly apple trees) and dog rawhides are popular. Daily handling is important from a stimulation standpoint but will also help to tame them and make them more friendly.

Degus' nutritional needs also vary from that of many of our traditional rodent pets. They are generally offered a combination of chinchilla and guinea pig pellets as well as having timothy hay available 24/7. Since they have cheek teeth that continuously grow (similar to rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas) they require the grinding action of a high-fiber diet in order to keep the teeth healthy. Small amounts of vegetables may be offered, but fruits should be limited since degus are pretty sugar intolerant.

Children need to learn that degus will lose their tail, particularly the tip, if it is grabbed roughly because that is part of their natural defense mechanism. It does not grow back.

Unfortunately, as they are a prey species, degus tend to hide illness, so it's best to have them checked by a veterinarian when they are healthy for a base comparison. By the time illness is apparent to the owner, a degu has probably been sick for quite a while. Sadly, most degus are quite sick by the time they first get to the veterinarian.

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