

Degus

Are you considering a degu as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Degus are high-maintenance pets, and Degus can live up to 10 years and require specialized care. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$500-700 each year for a single, healthy degu. Follow these guidelines for basic degu husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



Basic Care

Housing

The minimum recommended cage size is 24”L x 18”W x 24”H, but larger is definitely better, providing room for running, jumping, climbing multiple levels, foraging, hiding, a dust bath, possibly a litter box. Cage bottoms should be solid rather than wire to prevent foot ulcers. To keep your degu engaged and happy, provide environmental enrichments, such as an exercise wheel, tunnels, wood branches and thick cotton ropes for climbing, cardboard boxes (free of staples) with entry and exit holes, brown paper bags, toilet paper rolls, untreated wicker balls and untreated apple branches.

Companionship

Degus naturally live in groups and should not be kept alone if it can be helped. However, they should only be kept in single-sex groups to prevent breeding. Males will also fight to the death for a claim of the females if kept in mixed-sex groups. It is best to adopt already-bonded degus, as bonding can be tricky. Consult your vet or the many informative resources available before beginning the bonding process.

Bedding & Litter

It is best to use cardboard, towels, or blankets (with no loose threads). You can also use recycled newspaper beddings, wood stove pellets, or hemp bedding. Never use pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter, as these products are toxic to degus.

Grooming

Avoid water baths as this can interfere with their natural skin oils. Use a damp cloth to spot clean if necessary. Like chinchillas, degus clean themselves well with dust baths. The container and dust can be purchased at most pet stores. Provide dust baths intermittently; generally, a bath twice per week for 15-20 minutes is sufficient.

Food & Water

Degus are herbivores. A healthy diet consists of:

- Hay: unlimited amounts of grass-based hay. Timothy hay, Brome hay, and Meadow Grass are all appropriate. Hay makes up the majority of their diet.
- Pellets: 2-3 Tbsp per day of a mixture of chinchilla or guinea pig pellets and rodent blocks.
- A variety of fresh vegetables can be given in small quantities to avoid diarrhea. Favourites are sweet potato (peeled, uncooked), carrots, broccoli, leafy greens, green beans, and dandelion leaves (must be pesticide-free).
- Treats: Degus cannot digest sugar and are prone to diabetes, so foods high in sugar and fat should be avoided. Seeds, peanuts and whole nuts in the shell can be useful in training but provide very small amounts, as they are high in fat.
- Chew toys: It is important to provide wooden blocks and branches and willow toys to keep their teeth trimmed and deter destructive chewing.
- Toxic foods: Most household plants are toxic to degus. Avoid food made for humans and commercial treats as they can upset their sensitive digestive systems.

Water: provide unlimited fresh water daily. Bowls are more easily accessible to your pet as well as easier for you to clean regularly!

House-proofing

Degus are avid chewers and can easily chew through wood or plastic. For this reason, they should be housed in metal cages. Also, be sure to provide your degu with safe food and toys and keep them away from potential hazards such as wires and cords.

Allergies?

If you or a member of your household suffers from seasonal allergies, you might be allergic to the food or bedding degus use. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products prior to adopting.

Health Care

Veterinary Care

Veterinary costs can be more expensive than that of cats and dogs because degus are considered an exotic species and must be treated by a qualified exotic pet veterinarian. While degus do not require vaccinations, they should see the vet yearly for a check-up or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to Adopting: Find a degu-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their prices for check-ups and other common procedures.

Common Medical Concerns

Since degus are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses to avoid being left behind by their group. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. Common symptoms include but are not limited to: respiratory issues, lack of appetite, overconsumption of water, over-frequent urination, infrequent stools, obesity, change in coat, head tilt, and lumps. Degus' teeth grow continuously and can become misaligned or overgrown if not provided with sufficient chewing materials (hay, wood). They are also prone to heatstroke from high temperatures and exposure to direct sunlight, as well as hypothermia if they get wet.

Degu Behaviour

Psychology

Since degus are prey animals, they are at the bottom of the food chain: everything can eat them and, they are never safe. This dramatically shapes the way they see the world. Degus need to feel safe and secure, have spots for hiding, and are most comfortable with their feet planted safely on the ground.

Bonding with your Degu

Be gentle when interacting with your pet degu: once you gain their trust, they will show you great loyalty. Respect their boundaries: not all degus enjoy being picked up and prefer to cuddle with you on their own terms. Degus are social, active, and intensely curious. The most important thing to do to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with it every day and provide plenty of environmental enrichments inside and outside the cage. They are crepuscular, meaning they most active at dawn and dusk, so find a time they are naturally active to socialize with them. Like with people, degus' personalities can vary; some can be shy or outgoing, sweet or grumpy, placid or playful. Get to know your degu's personality and treat it accordingly: for instance, shy degus will need more socialization in order to feel comfortable around people. Handling Degus are delicate and can be squirmy and difficult to handle. When picking them up, use both hands to secure them. Dropping a degu can cause serious injury, so if a degu is struggling, put it down. Degus are also very fragile, so they are prone to broken bones if held too tightly or handled roughly.

Origins

The Degu originates from Chile and their environment, in a wide-ranging environment from high elevated mountains to beaches and scrubland. They, therefore, have no aversion to the cold. However, they dislike extremes of heat or cold and damp conditions. Degus also like to be able to sunbathe, as long as they can get out of the sun whenever they want. In the wild, degus live in large family groups.

Understanding Degu Vocalizations

- Rapid Squeals: Upset or scared.
- Cry/Squeak: Indicates pain.
- Teeth Chattering (vigorous): Feels threatened or is in pain.
- Chirping/Warbling: Contentment.