



Care of Degus



Ness Exotic Wellness Center

1007 Maple Ave.
Lisle, IL 60532
(630) 737-1281

Degus (“day-goo”) are small rodents native to Chile, found in the semi-arid shrub lands from the Andes Mountains to the Pacific coast. They appear much like large gerbils (although they are sometimes called mini-chinchillas, and are in fact related to chinchillas and guinea pigs), with a 6” long body and a 6” long tail as adults. The fur is tweed brown on the back with a cream colored stomach. In captivity, some breeders have produced a larger variety of colors. They are active during the day, are herbivorous (plant-eaters), and typically live 5-8 years.

Husbandry

Degus are very active and like to climb. They should be provided wooden toys for chewing; those designed for chinchillas work well. They should be housed in a glass or metal habitat—anything made of plastic or wood will eventually be destroyed. Also avoid toxic metals like zinc-coated (galvanized) materials. It is important to make sure that your Degu does not become over-heated, and temperatures should be kept between 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures approaching 85 degrees can be dangerous for these mountain critters. Like a chinchilla, a dust bath (volcanic ash) can be provided for coat care but this should be removed soon after use or they will use it as a litter box. Bedding in the cage should also be non-toxic and inert; recycled paper products are the best; avoid wood shavings. Degus are very sociable and do well in pairs and groups. However, one should take care to avoid two males in the same enclosure if there could be competition over females. One should also avoid keeping related males and females together to prevent inadvertent breeding. Often, it is easier to introduce a new female than a new male to an existing degu; males tend to be much more aggressive in defending their social position within an established group.

Diet

Degus are herbivores, and eat large amounts of poor quality forage. This includes grass hay (timothy, brome, botanical, or oat), dark green leafy vegetables (kale, romaine, parsley, and the like). Pellets made for guinea pigs and chinchillas can also be fed in limited quantities, but care must be taken not to over feed pellets. Degus will often stash pellets, making it seem like they ate them all and need more, when in fact they have only been hidden for later consumption. Feeding too many pellets or other sugary foods like dried fruits and treats will lead to an overweight degu that is likely to then become diabetic. Also avoid toxic foods like chocolate and caffeine. Degus should always have access to clean water, preferably from a bottle as they often spill bowls. A good rodent multi-vitamin containing vitamin D helps to round out the degu’s nutritional profile.

Recommended Greens and Vegetables ...

Kale	Spinach	Mustard Greens
Parsley	Cabbage	Turnip Greens
Collard Greens	Cauliflower	Baby Greens
Broccoli (heads and leaves)	Brussels Sprouts	Celery Leaves
Beet greens	Dandelion Greens	Romaine Lettuce

Breeding

Breeding degus can be difficult. Baby degus are large and numerous (3-8 pups to a litter), which can often lead to birthing complications. The gestation period is 90 days, and it is often difficult to tell that a female is pregnant until the last month. Also, a female degu can get pregnant within 24 hours of having a litter, so make sure the male is absent to prevent this breed-back litter. Young are very active even a few hours after birth, and can be separated from their parents at 8 weeks. Pups may begin eating hay and greens within a few hours of being born. Young degus become sexually mature within a couple of months of age, so if you want to prevent more litters, males (or females) should be neutered at about 4-6 weeks of age.

Diseases

Diabetes is common in degus, and as such they are used as a model for diabetes research for people. Therefore, regular monitoring of their blood glucose is recommended, especially if they show symptoms of excess thirst and increased urination. In addition, they also develop cataracts from being diabetic. Since degus are very prone to diabetes, limit pellets and avoid sugary foods like dried fruits and treats in the diet to prevent obesity and minimize the risks for diabetes.

Bumblefoot is common in degus, like other pets when kept on wire-bottom cages or unclean bedding. This presents as sores on the bottom of the feet, which can become ulcerated and lead to severe infections that can involve the bones of the foot.

Digestive conditions resulting from a diet deficient in fiber or high in sugar, include bloat and GI stasis. Often, these disorders can be prevented by proper diet. However, veterinary treatment is necessary when they occur to prevent a fatal outcome.

Dental disease is caused by malocclusion of their teeth, which continue to grow throughout life. Both the front incisors as well as their cheek teeth (molars) continue to grow in these types of rodents. If the teeth are out of alignment, just chewing on things will not keep them worn down. Proper dental care by a qualified exotic pet veterinarian is important to prevent further trauma of the teeth or jaws.

Tail Slough is the defensive mechanism where the skin is pulled off the end of the tail when grabbed by the tail. In nature, this allows the degu to escape a predator that grasps them by the tail. However, in captivity it occurs when an unsuspecting person picks up the degu by the tail. This condition is alarming, but typically not too serious. Proper cleaning and medicating the exposed tissue is warranted. Any sign of weight loss should be addressed as soon as possible, as this could indicate overgrown teeth, emerging diabetes, or other serious health issues. You should contact your veterinarian if you notice any health issues for a complete evaluation of your degu's health.