

## ----- Feeding

Grass is the Degu's natural diet. Their molars are suited for grinding plant matter, & grow continuously throughout the animal's life. Degu benefit from feeding on fresh grass hay, such as timothy hay, in addition to food pellets which are often based from timothy. Alfalfa is also a popular food choice. The basis of a good degu diet is a combination of high quality chinchilla or guinea pig pellets, & rodent blocks. Grass hay should be available all the time & a small amount of alfalfa hay can also be offered. A variety of fresh vegetables can be given, especially sweet potato (peeled, uncooked), carrots, broccoli, leafy greens, green beans, & dandelion leaves (must be pesticide-free). These should be offered in small quantities only or they may cause diarrhea. Vegetables that are members of the cabbage family (cabbage, broccoli, brussel sprouts, kale) should be fed only in very small quantities. Degus are prone to diabetes & are designed to eat a diet high in roughage & low in carbohydrates. Keep sugary foods to a minimum. Fruit should be avoided as a treat (including raisins) due to their high sugar content. For treats, most degus relish seeds (e.g. sunflower seeds), peanuts, or whole nuts in the shell. These should only be an occasional treat, due to the high fat content. Their diet needs to be controlled, find high fibre, low fat treats.

**Seek veterinary attention if your pet changes behavior or becomes inactive; this may indicate the pet has an illness.**

**As a pet owner, you are responsible for proper pet practices. Be prepared to take an ill pet to a Veterinarian & know which Veterinarian in your area can treat your pet.**



## check-list ✓

### Your pet Degu requires...

- Aquarium or Cage of appropriate size & wire gauge
- Water bottle(best), dish or bowl
- Substrate or bedding material
- Cave/Den/Hiding spot
- Wood blocks or items for chewing
- Food dish for Degu appropriate pellets
- Food dish for fresh treats

## Degu

• weighing between 170g - 300g (6 - 11 oz), & measuring between 25 & 32cm (9-12 inches).

• Life Span: 6- 10 years on average.



## ----- Temperament

The degu is a small rodent that is native to Chile. It is sometimes referred to as the brush-tailed rat. Degus are in the parvorder Caviomorpha of the infraorder Hystricognathi, along with the chinchilla & guinea pig. They are highly social, living in small groups. They burrow & build elaborated nests, crevices & tunnels. Degus digging together coordinate their activities, forming digging chains. They nest communally & females may nurse off-spring not their own. Unlike most other rodents, male degus also take part in raising their pups until they are old enough to leave the family. They forage in groups also as their ability to detect predators is increased in larger packs. They have a vocal repertoire comprising up to 15 unique sounds. The young need to be able to hear their mother's calls if the emotional systems in their brains are to develop properly. They are active during the day & degu have good vision. One interesting area of degu behavior is circadian rhythm function (the ability of the brain to tell what time of day it is). Degus can take cues that do not relate to day length, such as temperature, melatonin levels & even scents from other degus to adjust their internal body clock.

After initial interest into degus as research subjects (similar to rats & guinea pigs), degus have become popular as pets. Not until very recently, were they found in pet shops. Their advantages over traditional rodent pets are; Degu sleep at night, have a bubbly personality, the haired tail (as compared to rats & mice) & their lifespan. The average lifespan of a degu in captivity is typically around 6-10 years of age. One disadvantage of the degu as a pet is their predisposition to chewing, due to their continually growing incisor & molar teeth. For this reason degus cannot be housed in plastic-bottomed cages. As with most small animals, degus can bite, but their intelligence makes them easy to tame. Rabbits are a comparable experience. They are smart & have good memories. Once the degu understands that you are not a threat (bribing with treats helps) they will enjoy spending time with you. Degus will lick or 'groom' their owners, with a gentle nibbling action, & readily bond with any person spending time with them.

## ----- Housing



Degus are safe, hardy & a good pet choice. They are smart & active all day.

Degus do not require a huge cage, but the larger the cage, the less cleaning, & more exercise & entertainment for the degu. One Degu will need about 2-3 sqft with an added 1 sqft for any additional (they are very social & live in groups). Keep in mind that the cage should provide enough space for a hiding area, feeding area (pellet dish & water bottle), & an area for voiding. Any cage should have a solid, washable bottom. Wire bottoms cause foot & leg injuries. The sides can be made of wire, & a cover to prevent other animals from entering the cage. Degu will enjoy an exercise wheel & one should be included.

- **Substrate:** Pine kiln-dried shavings are the best bedding material. A 1-2 inch lining over the bottom of the entire cage should be provided. Do not use Cedar shavings, because they contain toxic oils, which can lead to respiratory difficulties & disease. In addition, sawdust bedding should never be used, because the dust causes eye irritation & respiratory problems. Corn cob bedding can be used, but is not ideal, as some degus will eat the bedding, & the corn cob pellets mold very quickly. Yesterday's Newspaper, hay can also be used.
- **Decoration:** Hardwood branches, blocks, etc are good things to have in your enclosure to give your degu something to gnaw & chew. Hiding boxes are needed for degus, it prevents stress by giving them time away from prying eyes & a safe secure sleeping den.
- **Water:** The water bottle is best as a constant water source. Degus tend to tread in every thing & water bowls often become a labour.

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## ----- Health



Degus have toenails that grow continuously. They may require regular clipping to prevent overgrowth. A veterinarian can demonstrate the proper way to clip degu nails. Some Degu have tooth problems, & may have to have their teeth clipped on occasion. Always keep track of the length of the incisors, & be sure to provide plenty of chewable foods to help wear down the teeth. Never grab or try to pick up a degu by the tail. They can easily lose part of their tail & have a messy injury as a result. Shedding their tail is probably a natural defense of wild degus to escape if caught by the tail. Monitor what your degu is eating. Sometimes weight loss is the only indication of illness. Any indications of respiratory problems, diarrhea, balding, excessive scratching or weight loss are likely emergency situations. A yearly veterinary visit is always recommended to ensure the health of all pets. Degus can develop cataracts secondary to diabetes onset. This is often a major indicator that your degu is diabetic. Hair loss or bald patches suddenly appearing may mean over stress (excessive squealing) or allergies. A good diet & cleaning the cage often prevents most illness.

## ----- Behavior & Interaction

Degus are very trainable. They pick up some behaviours on their own, such as squealing when they like something, or they chatter their teeth when they are happy & cuddled. They can even be taught to play with objects or run through tunnels. They can also be trained to use a litter box inside the cage (never use clumping cat litter) by placing it in the degu's selected waste area. Degus are herd animals & do like to have a friend or two. If more than one degu is desired, having all the same gender is best to avoid the issues of pregnancy & offspring. Younger degus are easy to train & take a little less time to acclimatize, while older ones may take a little longer to get used to a new home. It is essential to have newborns spend the correct amount of time with it's mother before separation. Degu's brain development requires a learning period, A symptom similar to ADD occurs with premature separation. On a warm day, you can bring your degu outside. Be sure to have an enclosure that will protect the degu from running away. The grass in the area will get mowed & should be free of chemicals, & animal waste. Hiding spots & a cover should be provided. Degus are quiet, smart, friendly & have good memories. They are ideal for periodic visits, play or petting sessions.

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