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## THE CARE OF DEGUS

Degus (*Octodon degu*) are rat-sized rodents that are native to the Andes Mountains in Chile. They are diurnal (active during the day) and feed primarily on grass, leaves, etc. in the wild. They are closely related to guinea pigs and chinchillas. They are very social animals, usually found in groups of five to ten adults in the wild. Their average lifespan is 5-7 years.

### DIET

Degus seem to do well in captivity on a diet of guinea pig pellets, vegetables, and grass hay. Avoid overfeeding and avoid feeding carbohydrate sources such as seeds, sugary fruits, etc. as these can result in diabetes in these animals.

It is not known if degus require dietary vitamin C like their cousins the guinea pigs, so the safest route is to supply a source. Fresh guinea pig pellets (less than three months old) are a good source of vitamin C, or supplements can be given.

Hay should be provided free choice. Grass hay, such as timothy, is preferable. Alfalfa hay is much higher in calories, and it can have excessive amounts of calcium. This excess calcium can lead to bladder and kidney stones. The fiber in hay is important to normal digestive function and it helps to keep the teeth worn down.

### BREEDING

Degus seem to do best in groups of one male to two females. The male can be left with the females after the litter is born. Sexual maturity occurs at about 3-6 months of age. Gestation lasts between 87-93 days, with up to 5 (rarely as many as 10) young per litter. The young are usually weaned at about 4-6 weeks of age. Degus will usually have 2 litters per year.

### MEDICAL CONCERNS

Diabetes is one of the most common medical problems in degus. They are exquisitely sensitive to carbohydrates and sugars in their diet. Foods, which are high in these, such as grains or seeds, bread, sugary snacks, even excessive fruit, will lead to diabetes. Avoidance is by feeding a proper diet that is high in fiber and low in calories. Signs of diabetes may include excessive thirst and urination, chronic infections, and cataracts. A simple blood test can detect the condition.

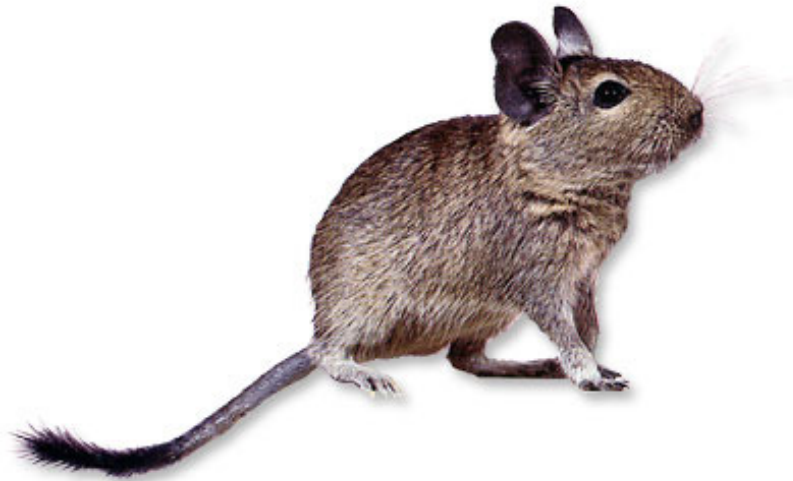
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There is little information available at this time about the efficacy of insulin treatment in this species.

Parasites are often found in degus, especially if they are wild caught or exposed to wild caught animals. Parasitism leads to weight loss and gastrointestinal problems. All degus should have fecal checks and appropriate deworming.



*Photo from <http://www.degu-hut.com/degu.jpg>*

One problem, which may be very disconcerting to the owner, is loss of the tail. If a degu is grasped or lifted by its tail, the skin will often slough, leaving the bone exposed. This will need to be amputated (although sometimes the degu will bite it off himself!), but usually causes no long term problems. The tail does not regrow.

Dental malocclusion is seen in some lines of degus. Degu teeth grow continually, and if there is a problem with the way they meet they will not be properly worn down. As teeth overgrow, they can develop spurs. These spurs can cut into the cheeks or the tongue, making eating painful and difficult. Filing or cutting of the teeth under anesthesia is required to reshape the teeth and remove the spurs. This may need to be repeated as the teeth grow.

It is recommended that your degu have a veterinary examination at least once annually to help detect any medical problems in the early stages.

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