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THE CARE OF SUGAR GLIDERS

Sugar gliders are small marsupial tree "squirrels" that are native to Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Borneo. They are primarily nocturnal (active at night). In the wild, they eat tree sap, leaf buds, fruit, insects, small birds, etc. Their average lifespan is 10-12 years. Sugar gliders that are kept as pets are primarily descended from animals imported from Indonesia.

Sugar gliders are very social animals and should be kept in pairs or groups. If kept singly, they will become depressed and can even die from stress related problems secondary to loneliness. Hence, sugar gliders have been used in developing many human antidepressants because will develop clinical depression and low serotonin levels if they are isolated.

Sugar gliders are high maintenance animals. They can be sweet and lovable pets, but if they are not socialized when young and do not continue to receive sufficient attention, they will bite and scratch fiercely, and neither of you will enjoy your time together. Older animals that have not been tamed do not usually make very good pets. It is important to start with a young glider and to be prepared to give it plenty of attention if you want a good family pet. If you are unable to devote a lot of time daily to these animals, they are not the pet for you.

Gliders originated in rain forest habitats, but they seem to do well at room temperatures (upper 60's to mid 80's). A proper cage should be large, especially in height, to allow plenty of room for climbing. A minimum size should be 2 feet x 2 feet x 6 feet. Branches should be placed vertically in the cage to allow for exercise and play, and many gliders like to chew the bark. Any nontoxic wood, such as maple or apple, can be used. Avoid wild cherry and walnut, as these can be toxic.

Diet requirements are still controversial. It has recently been recognized that they have higher protein requirements than previously believed. About one third of their diet should be protein sources, with the other two thirds being a wide variety of fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables. A good example of diet mixture is one-part high quality dry commercial cat or dog food mixed with fruits and vegetables (three-quarter fruits, one-quarter vegetables). This formula meets the sugar

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and protein needs. Fat should be kept to a minimum. They can eat a wide variety of foods including: fruits, vegetables, protein, breads, and cereals. Fresh produce is ideal and can be frozen and then thawed but canned fruits packed in syrup or processed baby food should not be used. The ideal fruits are berries, citrus, figs, papaya, or flower blossoms. Grapes, bananas, apples, pears, and melon are not recommended. When insects are used for diets, it is important that they are properly gut loaded and not collected in the yard, as insecticides are a fatal threat to sugar gliders.

If treats are to be used, the calorie and fruit allotment should be included in the daily calorie intake. For example, one-half teaspoon of applesauce can equal 7% of daily energy needs for the average 130 gram sugar glider. Obesity can be a problem for captive gliders and preventative measures should be taken to avoid extra calories.



Photo from <http://www.chrisabraham.com/sugarglider-thumb.gif>

An adequate example of sugar glider diet:

- 5 gram dry cat food
- 5 gram berries
- 5 gram citrus
- 5 gram other approved fruit
- 5 gram sweet potato
- 1 gram meal worm (or other invertebrates such as grasshoppers, moths, fly pupae, crickets; optional)

Another example of a diet that can be blended into a slurry:

- 12 grams chopped mixed fruit (any type, <10% citrus)
- 2.5 grams cooked, chopped vegetables
- 10 grams peach or apricot nectar
- 5.5 gram ground, dry, low-iron bird diet
- 1 gram mealworm (or other invertebrates, as above, optional)

These mixtures can then be blended and frozen. When ready, you can remove the amount needed, thaw, and feed.

There are a few commercially available glider diets, but even these should be used only as a part of the diet, not fed as the only source of nutrition. There is much to be learned about the true dietary needs of sugar gliders.

Sugar gliders reach breeding age at about a year of age. Both males and females can be slightly more aggressive during breeding and pregnancy. Pregnancy lasts about 16 days, and babies remain in the pouch for about 70 days after birth. If a baby is dropped from the pouch, try to gently replace it. The mother will usually accept the baby if it is returned, but will not pick it up herself.

The female may bear 2-4 litters per year, usually with 1-2 young per litter. If breeding is not planned, spaying or neutering may make these better pets as it will reduce breeding related aggression and the male's odor.

The most common medical problems we see in sugar gliders are related to poor or improper nutrition. If they are fed diets that are too high in fat, lipid (fatty) deposits build up in the eye. This can result in blindness. Low fat diets are important to prevent this - avoid regular dog and cat food, sunflower seeds, nuts, fatty meats, etc.

Another common problem is rear limb paralysis. There are many possible causes for this. Gliders have a high calcium need, and if they do not receive enough their calcium levels can drop enough to cause muscle weakness or even spinal fractures. Vitamin E deficiency may also play a role, especially if there are no signs of skeletal degeneration. Vitamin E is important for muscle function, and is an antioxidant.

Routine veterinary care should include parasite checks, ocular exams, and annual physicals. There are no routine vaccinations for sugar gliders.

References:

Veterinary Clinics of North America: Exotic Animal Practice, Nutrition and Behavior of Uncommon Species, Volume 12, Number 2, Elsevier, 2009

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