# Degu

Species: Degu

Scientific names: Octodon degus

# Description

Degus are rodents that look a little like gerbils, but are bigger. However, some research suggests they may be quite closely related to rabbits. The degu's front legs are shorter than its back legs and they have quite large ears. They have long silky coats that are grey-brown tinged with orange on their backs and creamy yellow to white on their bellies. Their combined head and body length is about 12–20cm and they have tails of about four–18cm with a black tuft on the end. Degus live for six to seven years.

#### Life in the wild

Degus are native to Chile where they are found in the northern and central parts of the country. They inhabit the west slopes of the Andes up to an elevation of 1,200m. They live on grass and other green vegetation, bark, seeds and fruit. Degus feed on the ground, but will climb into the branches of shrubs and small trees. They are active during the day and all year round. They construct an elaborate, communal burrow system and live together in small colonies.

#### Source of animals

Degus available through the pet trade in the UK are captive bred. Your veterinary surgeon may be able to advise on a reputable source or your local RSPCA animal centre may have degus that need rehoming. Degus may be on sale in some pet shops, where you should be able to see the animals and discuss the care they need.

## Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a degu, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is ready before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species and UK breeders that keep this species in captivity.

#### Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Degus may need care and treatment by an experienced veterinary surgeon. The vet can advise on costs of consultations and many vets will charge lower consultation fees for examining small animals like degus.

When away on holiday, arrangements need to be made to ensure someone feeds the degus and checks on the animals and their enclosure every day.

#### Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy degu should be alert with bright, clear eyes, clean ears, glossy fur, a clean tail and have a rear end with no signs of faeces. Discharge from its nose and signs of difficulty breathing could mean the degu has a respiratory infection. Wetness around its mouth could indicate overgrown teeth. Its teeth should be yellow not white, as white teeth are a sign of vitamin A deficiency. An opaque whitening of the eyes can also be a sign that the animal has developed diabetes.

## Health issues to find out about

- Overgrown teeth
- Vitamin A deficiency
- Liver disease
- Diabetes
- Tail loss
- Heat stroke
- Pneumonia
- Other respiratory infections

## Why are degus vulnerable in captivity?

Degus are completely dependent upon their owners to be provided with the correct accommodation, environment and food all of which must reflect as closely as possible that found in the animals' wild habitat. Without correct care they will suffer stress, disease and eventually die. Their cage should always be kept at the recommended temperature as degus cannot sweat and are very susceptible to heat stroke. They are also susceptible to respiratory infections, including pneumonia, and should be kept out of draughts. A solid roof on the cage top is essential to stop them feeling threatened and stressed by movements from above that they associate with predators. They do not like being handled and are not recommended for anyone who has small children. The diet also needs to be right; not too high in fat or sugar as these animals may develop liver disease and are susceptible to diabetes.

## Handling/transporting the animal home

Degus should never be caught or held by their tail as they will lose them very easily. They should be allowed to climb on the hand and then picked up. Hands swooping down on them from above will cause stress, as it is natural for degus to run away from wild predators approaching from above. They can be transported in rigid, sturdy plastic containers with ventilation panels. Bedding should always be provided and food can be given unless the journey is very short.

## Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Degus are social animals and should be kept in pairs or small family groups. If breeding of the animals is planned, then any keeper must first make sure they have good homes for any offspring. Otherwise, keeping two degus of the same sex together is the best option. Two degus will need a multi-level wire cage of at least 100cm long x 60cm wide x 60cm high with a solid floor. The wire must not be painted or coated with any material to avoid the risk of the occupants chewing anything toxic, with the bars being no wider apart than 2cm when keeping adults or 1cm if young animals are being kept in the cage. The floor should be made of wood or glass – as wire floors will hurt a degu's feet – and covered with a thick layer of non-toxic wood shavings and hay to allow burrowing. The cage should be kept out of direct sunlight and draughts and placed at a waist-high height that is not next to any hot radiators, as degus easily overheat.

A degu enclosure needs to be furnished with non-toxic branches securely tied to the cage sides, for climbing and to chew on. Pear, apple, ash, beech or oak branches are all fine, but yew, laurel or cedar branches are not. A stable rock formation can provide for additional climbing. A nest box is also needed of about 20cm long x 15cm wide x 15cm high, filled with shredded paper for bedding. Alternatively, the bedding material can be left beside the nest box to allow the degus to make a nest using the material available, as they would naturally do in the wild. A heavy bowl filled with suitable sand (a mixture of nine parts silver sand with one part fuller's earth or chinchilla sand is ideal) is also needed for dust baths to help keep the animals' fur in good condition. Degus need to have access to the dust bath twice a week for about 20 minutes a time. Degus are very active, so in addition to providing branches and different levels in the cage, a solid exercise wheel fixed to the side of the cage with a minimum diameter of 25cm is desirable to provide another source of exercise. Clay piping can also be added to provide a tunnel system for further burrowing.

A captive environment at a temperature of 20°C is suitable for degus, as above this they will overheat as they cannot sweat to cool down. If too hot, the degu may be seen lying flat on its stomach and limiting any movement to cool down. A 12-hour light to 12-hour dark cycle is appropriate to reflect the light period in the wild in Chile.

Good quality chinchilla and guinea pig pellets, containing a wide variety of seeds, cereals, grains and dried vegetables, should be fed to degus very day. Fresh guinea pig pellets provide a good source of vitamin C for keeping their gums and teeth healthy. They should also be given good quality hay (timothy hay) and a large supply of fresh green alfalfa. Fresh dandelion leaves and root vegetables, such as carrots, sweet potato, swede and parsnip, can be offered every other day. High fat foods like peanuts, sunflower seeds and food high in sugar like fruits and carbohydrates are bad for degus. For this reason, chinchilla pellets containing molasses should be avoided.

Food should be supplied in a heavy dish that the degu cannot tip up, or in one attached to the side of the cage. The provision of clean drinking water in a metal spouted drinking bottle is essential. The water should be de-chlorinated and changed daily.

The cage should be totally cleaned each week with a change of any soiled substrate and bedding material. A mild disinfectant can be used to clean the cage, as long as it is then fully rinsed and dried before putting the cleaned nest box, exercise wheel etc, and any animals back.

## THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.