

Owning degus can be fun and very rewarding, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment.
Did you know gerbils can live on average 5-8 years?

Providing for all your degu's needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in a long and healthy life. Here are some guidelines for offering your gerbils the best care:



Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



Enclosure size:

Our housing requirements aim to ensure the best welfare standards for degus. Our team are happy to offer advice in purchasing or adapting your set-up to provide the best home before adopting. Choosing the right home for your degus is important as this is where they will spend much of their time. Degus love to climb and explore; therefore, they need an enclosure size of at least 5ft x 3ft x 2ft (H x D x W) or 152cm x 90cm x 60cm for up to 5 degus, although bigger is always better!

An enriching degu enclosure will have:

- A mixture of safe substrates that can maintain its shape: our recommendations are below.
- Hides filled with a suitable bedding material (hay, teabag or tissue bedding).
- Wooden or cardboard enrichment such as tunnels, bridges, logs, tubes, boxes etc. Using hanging enrichment such as ropes should be avoided due to degu's fast, bouncy behaviours as their limbs can become entrapped and injured.
- A wooden or metal wheel (minimum 28cm), this is optional depending on your degus' preferences.
- Sand bath: special bathing sand is required to allow the gerbils to keep their coat clean and help to prevent mites. Degus only groom themselves when feeling completely relaxed, safe and stress free. Preferably, this should be given 2-3 days a week rather than daily to avoid it becoming a toilet area.
- A food and water bowl; water bowls are recommended over bottles as they allow for natural drinking and are easier to clean.



Raystede Centre for Animal Welfare, The Broyle, Ringmer, East Sussex, BN8 5AJ.

Tel: (01825) 880467 E-mail: smallanimals@raystede.org www.raystede.org

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- Soft hammocks for sleeping in.
- Plenty of things to climb on, such as branches (willow or apple wood), wooden shelves. Other enrichment could include tubes, rocks, wooden blocks and terracotta pots. Wooden shelves hooked on to the sides are also ideal. A bedroom area for snuggling should be made from a sturdy wooden box; if you are using bedding keep this to a minimum inside the box. You should **not** use ladders as they can damage their limbs by getting them caught in these gaps.

Bedding:

The bottom of the cage should be solid and lined with newspaper and a thin layer of bedding, such as **hay, paper substrate or natural paper pellet (cat litter)**. Wood shavings are not advisable as they give off aromatic oils which are harmful to degus. We recommend avoiding most wood shavings or sawdust as these are known to cause respiratory issues in small animals, cotton wool-style bedding should also be avoided as it can cause blockages if ingested. Please also avoid purchasing enrichment made of compressed wood shavings as these are dangerous if consumed. If you would like any recommendations, please contact the Small Animals Team.

Cleaning:

Enclosures should be cleaned once a week, but a small amount of old, used bedding can be kept and scattered in the fresh enclosure so that the enclosure still smells like them. You should also add in a handful of fresh hay each day. A **sand bath** should be provided to keep their fur in good condition, this should be changed regularly or sieved daily to remove any faeces. Degus love to chew so providing wooden or cardboard enrichment is the safest option; plastic shards can cause injuries or blockages if your gerbils ingest them. Your degu's enclosure should be given a thorough deep clean once a week, whereby all items are removed and cleaned with pet safe disinfectant. You can then add in some new enrichment and slightly rearrange the enclosure to keep them stimulated by their environment.



Preserve their health by protecting them from pain, injury, and disease



Finding a degu-savvy exotic vet can be difficult, it is a good idea to check that your vet is able to treat them or seek a specialist exotic vet.

Check your gerbils for signs of injury or illness every day by handling them briefly and seek veterinary advice if necessary.

- **Check teeth and nails** are not becoming overgrown- teeth are naturally yellow in colour. This is because an oral enzyme found in their saliva stains a young degu's tooth enamel as the tooth forms. The dark orange colouration is a sign of good health.
- **Check eyes** are clear and bright
- **Check coat and skin** for signs of mites, bald patches, sores, or lumps
- **Check nose** for discharge and for clear breathing
- **Check for a clean and dry bottom**
- **Monitor faeces and urine** for any changes from the norm

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Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



Feeds should be in pellet form with balanced nutrients, rather than a muesli mix, to prevent selective feeding. There are many different premixed pellets on the market, check the labels and select those that are specific to degus with good quality ingredients.

Their diet should include:

- **80% hay:** the best diet consists almost entirely of good quality hay and dried grass forage, available always. They should mainly consume meadow hay but can also enjoy a small amount of Timothy, alfalfa, and orchard grass.
- **5% complimentary feeds:** this should be in pellet form with balanced nutrients, rather than a muesli mix, to prevent selective feeding. **1 to 2 tbsp** of good quality pellets is plenty per degu. The pellet should be of excellent quality with the main ingredient being grass or hay.
- **15 % forage and healthy treats. Examples of this include:**
 - Twigs from pear, apple, or willow trees should be provided to wear down the teeth.
 - Seed pods and dried herbs. Just make sure these are degu safe such as mallow root.
 - Avoid high sugar treats: degus cannot break down sugars and have sensitive stomachs. Treats like these such as fruits or vegetable e.g. carrot or apple should be fed scarcely – one portion of a 5 pence piece size per week is plenty. Avoid commercial treats which are high in sugars.
 - Healthy commercial bought treats where the main ingredient is hay can be fed 2-3 times a week depending on the size.

Fresh water available at all times. We do not recommend using water bottles due to them being harder to keep clean and water bowls allowing a more natural way to drink. Please refresh your degu's water bowl daily and fill it right to the very top to help monitor drinking levels. You may need to refresh more regularly as necessary if any poo or bedding gets into the bowl.



Promote natural behaviour and provide appropriate companionship



When designing the layout of your degu enclosure you should incorporate as much enrichment as you can to promote natural behaviours. Degus are inquisitive and enjoy exploring new enrichment items. **Degus are diurnal** meaning they are awake and active during the daytime hours.

Promoting natural behaviours

Degus are very social animals, living in large colonies in the wild. They should always live in same sex groups or a neutered male with 1 or more females. They will become very withdrawn when split from their group or companion so always keep the group together if transporting to the vets, for example.



Degus enjoy nesting, grooming, and foraging together and can communicate together with vocalisations and body language. **They are extremely vocal** with sounds ranging from a soft, happy warble to a loud squeak which can be repeated for quite some time when angry or frightened. Degus can be bonded successfully with the right personalities and enough time dedicated to building their bond. If you are interested in bonding your degu (s) with a companion at our centre, please contact the Small Animals Team for appropriate methods. We will provide you with the correct advice and support along the way. If you would prefer, we do offer an **on-site bonding service**, for example, if you require a companion for your current single degu or want to add to your group. This process typically takes around a week, and we will send you regular updates via email at each stage. During this time, the Small Animals team observe the behaviours and assess whether the degus make a suitable match. Please note, this comes at a non-refundable fee of £20, to cover the costs of your animal's care.

Providing opportunities to chew is both mentally stimulating and helps to keep your degu's teeth in good condition. Rodent teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and chewing is a large part of their natural behaviour, their teeth need to be worn down by providing them with an appropriate diet and safe wood-based enrichment. Hay is a great option as they love chewing it into smaller pieces and provides additional structural support for their burrows. You can also add branches from various safe trees such as willow, hazel, or fruit trees.

Exercise

Degus require a minimum of 1 hour exercise per day outside of their enclosure. This should be done under supervision and you and the animal are comfortable doing so in a safe room. Ideally in the same room as their enclosure to keep smells familiar and allow easy safe access to and from their enclosure. Any wires should be covered or removed, any other animals or plants should be removed from the free roaming space.

Secure playpens, such as wire collapsible pens, can make wonderful play areas for degus under supervision. It gives them an option to explore a new area, and you can change enrichment and layout frequently. This is a good alternative to exercise balls which are considered stressful and can cause injuries. It also provides somewhere secure while handling a less confident animal.

Handling

While some degus may not tolerate handling, others can enjoy the experience when handled appropriately. We recommend letting small animals settle for a few weeks before starting the handling process, beginning by rubbing bedding from your degus' enclosure on your hands and placing your hands in the tank to let them approach you. Physical handling will need to start low to the ground (within a playpen or enclosure) is a good place to allow your degus to gain confidence with handling while keeping them safe should they run away. Ensure that when handling you fully support the whole degu's body. Children should always be supervised by an adult when handling and degus should never be held by their tail.

