

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Degu

The sugar-free rodent from Chile



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

*Degus (Octodon degus, the genus name meaning "eight teeth" — a nod to their ever-growing dentition) are the small-pet world's most underestimated animal, and we mean that genuinely, not as a sales line. A bonded pair of degus will completely rewire your expectations of what a small rodent can be. They are alert, socially complex, vocal enough to carry on what genuinely sounds like a conversation, and smart enough to learn their names, recognize individual family members by sight and voice, and solve puzzle feeders within minutes of introduction. They are also the longest-lived small rodent most families will ever keep: with good care, degus routinely reach six to eight years, putting them firmly in the same lifespan territory as a rabbit rather than the two-year arc of a hamster. Their origin in the dry coastal ranges and Andes foothills of Chile shapes every single care decision you will make — their narrow temperature window, their profound sensitivity to heat and humidity, their unambiguous requirement to live in social groups, and their extraordinary vulnerability to dietary sugar. This guide covers all of it. If there is one thing we want you to absorb before the setup details, it is this: degus and sugar are biologically incompatible in a way that is not a matter of moderation and is not forgiving even in small doses. We dedicate a full section to the science of that, because new owners who do not know it make a mistake that costs their animal years of life. For now, the foundational fact: **no fruit, no sweetened treats, no compromises** — a degu's pancreas simply cannot handle it. Let's start from the beginning.*

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Build the complete enclosure before any degus come home.** An animal arriving to a half-finished setup is a frightened, disoriented animal who is practically impossible to settle. The cage should be standing, fully furnished, stocked with hay and pellets, and at the correct ambient temperature before the carrier leaves the car.
2. **Plan for at least two degus from the very start.** This is not optional or a suggestion worth revisiting after the first animal "settles in." Degus are intensely social colonial animals who in the wild spend every waking hour communicating, grooming, playing, and sleeping in body contact with their group. A single degu does not simply feel lonely — it develops compulsive behaviors, stops using its wheel, loses normal eating patterns, and shows measurable physiological stress within weeks. Same-sex pairs or groups of two to four are the standard. Males and females can live together only if the males are neutered; an unneutered male-female pair will produce a litter roughly every three months.
3. **Verify the room temperature before placing the degus.** Target: 65–72°F. Degus are adapted to the cool, dry Andes and have almost no effective ability to thermoregulate through heat. A room consistently above 75°F is a real health risk; above 80°F is a life-threatening emergency. Check the room thermometer, not your own comfort level — what feels pleasantly warm to a person sitting at a desk in January may be genuinely dangerous to a degu in a furnished cage against the same wall.
4. **Stock only the correct foods before arrival.** Degus eat **unlimited fresh timothy or orchard grass hay** as the foundation of every single day — it is not a supplement, it is the centerpiece. Their pellets must be **degu-specific or chinchilla pellets with no added sugar**. Read the ingredient list and reject anything listing fructose, sucrose, molasses, corn syrup, dried fruit, honey, or any other sweetener anywhere in the ingredients. Prepare a small handful of safe fresh herbs — cilantro, flat-leaf parsley, dandelion greens, or romaine lettuce — for an initial offering the first evening. Do not bring fruit, yogurt drops, honey sticks, or any treat bag marketed for hamsters or rats into the house.
5. **Set up the sand bath station before the animals arrive.** Use **chinchilla sand** — the coarser-grained product, not chinchilla dust, which is too fine for degus and causes respiratory irritation with regular use. A ceramic or metal container large enough for the degu to roll in fully is the right vessel; plastic containers will be chewed and destroyed in short order. Offer the bath inside the enclosure for two to three sessions per week, 20–30 minutes per session, then remove it. Leaving it in permanently

causes it to be used as a toilet, defeating the grooming purpose entirely.

6. **Remove every piece of plastic from inside the cage before any degu enters.** Degus chew constantly — it is a normal, unstoppable part of degu behavior — and they will ingest plastic fragments without hesitation. Even small amounts of ingested plastic can cause **gastrointestinal obstruction** (a blockage in the digestive tract that can require surgery and carries a high mortality risk without it). Replace plastic platforms, tunnels, houses, wheels, and food dishes with ceramic, metal, hardwood, cork, or rope equivalents.
7. **Place the degus in the enclosure and allow four to five days of minimal interaction.** Provide food, fresh hay, and water daily, then step back. Newly arrived degus can be bolt-fast and will startle at almost any movement. Forced handling in the first few days undermines the long-term socialization you want. Sit near the cage, speak quietly, offer herbs from an open palm held inside the bars — do not reach for the animal. Let them come to you on their schedule.
8. **Find an exotic small mammal vet before you need one.** Call ahead and confirm they have experience with degus specifically — not just guinea pigs or rabbits. Degus are not routinely seen in general practice, and a vet unfamiliar with degu-specific diabetes, dental disease, and tail injuries is not set up to help you effectively in an emergency. Keep the number somewhere accessible, not just in a phone you cannot find at 10 p.m.

First-Time Starter Bundle

What needs to be in the house on day one, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **A tall multi-level wire cage with bar spacing of half an inch or less** — the minimum functional footprint for two degus is roughly 24 inches wide by 16 inches deep by 24 inches tall. Degus climb aggressively and the vertical dimension matters more than the floor footprint; a taller cage is a better cage. Avoid any habitat marketed primarily for hamsters or rats — most lack adequate vertical space or have bar spacing designed for larger animals. No glass tanks, no aquariums: degus generate significant ventilation demand and a sealed glass environment traps ammonia and humidity at unhealthy levels.
- **Solid wooden or metal platforms at multiple levels, connected by ramps or ladders** — wire mesh platforms catch toenails during fast movement and cause injuries; cover any existing wire platform surfaces with hardwood board, stone tiles, or solid metal sheets before introducing animals.
- **A solid-surface running wheel, 12 inches in diameter minimum** — wire, barred, or mesh wheels cause tail and toe injuries at this species' typical running speed. Solid-surface wheels designed for chinchillas or large degus are correct. A wheel at 11 inches is a common purchase error; go to 12.
- **Two or more wooden hide boxes** — degus sleep in close group contact and will pile into a shared hide. Provide one hide large enough for the full group, plus a second smaller hide for an animal who needs a break from the group. Avoid plastic hide boxes.
- **A hay rack or side-mounted hay feeder** — keeps hay off the substrate surface, reduces contamination, and allows you to see consumption clearly. Timothy and orchard grass hay should be available in unlimited quantity at all times.
- **Ceramic or stainless steel food dishes** — heavy enough to resist tipping, securely anchored if possible. One per enclosure. Replace any plastic dish immediately.
- **A sipper-style water bottle** — positioned low enough for all animals to reach without stretching uncomfortably. Check the sipper ball daily to confirm flow is unrestricted.
- **A digital room thermometer and hygrometer** — both mounted near the cage, not over a heating vent or near a window. These are non-negotiable environmental monitors for this species; guessing at temperature and humidity in a degu setup is not adequate.

- **Chinchilla sand in a ceramic or metal container** — for the sand bath station. Not dust. Not play sand. Not scented sand. Chinchilla sand.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: Critter Enclosures and Critter Bedding and Accessories.

Enrichment

- **Cork bark tunnels, flat sheets, and hides** — degus investigate and chew cork enthusiastically; it is completely safe to ingest and provides dense sensory enrichment. Flat cork bark sheets give a natural climbing surface that holds weight well and shows chew marks as normal wear.
- **Hardwood branches and climbing ledges** — apple, willow, hazel, and pear wood are all confirmed safe; make sure any branch is from a pesticide-free source, since fruit tree branches from commercial orchards may carry residue. Branches at varying heights and angles give the group a complex three-dimensional territory.
- **Natural fiber rope hammocks** — degus spend a surprising amount of time resting in elevated hammocks stretched between platforms. Natural fiber only; synthetic fabrics with loose loops catch toenails, and long fiber strands from unraveling fabric can wrap around limbs.
- **Foraging tubes and puzzle feeders** — hide small amounts of dried herbs, plain oat groats, or barley flakes inside foraging tubes or ball dispensers. Mental engagement from foraging significantly reduces the bar-chewing stereotypy that develops in understimulated degus.
- **A digging tray** — a deep ceramic or metal bin with a few inches of compressed paper substrate or chemical-free potting soil, positioned in one corner of the cage or on a lower platform. Degus are natural burrowers and will use a digging station actively and repeatedly.
- **A ventilated travel carrier** — a small secure container with ventilation and a small wooden hide inside. Introduce it to the main cage weeks before any planned vet visit so it carries the group's own scent and does not register as an alarm trigger when it appears.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Critter Toys and Accessories.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Degu

Wild degus (*Octodon degus*) live in the coastal ranges and Andes foothills of central Chile — a landscape of rocky dry slopes, sparse scrubland, caliche soils, and dry grasses that bake in summer and cool considerably at night and in winter. This is not a tropical environment. It is dry, it runs cooler than most people associate with South America, and it produces a diet of dry grasses, roots, bark, and sparse tough vegetation with essentially no naturally occurring sugar. Degus evolved in this environment across millions of years, and their entire metabolic architecture reflects it exactly: a pancreas optimized for lean, high-fiber, near-zero-fructose throughput, and completely unequipped for the sucrose and fructose loads found in fruit, sweetened pellets, or the standard contents of any hamster food mix.

In the wild, degus live in colonial family groups of five to twenty or more individuals, maintaining complex burrow systems and spending their active hours foraging, vocalizing, and maintaining social bonds through mutual grooming and play. The social structure is not optional background behavior — it is the organizing principle of degu life. Researchers who study the neuroscience of social deprivation and depression use single-housed degus specifically as an animal model, because the physiological stress profile of a socially isolated degu maps closely to the neurological and hormonal signature of clinical depression in mammals. Two is the absolute minimum. A group of three or four is genuinely better.

Trait	Detail
Scientific name	<i>Octodon degus</i>
Common names	Degu, common degu, brush-tailed rat (informal)
Native range	Coastal ranges and Andes foothills, central Chile
Wild habitat	Rocky dry slopes, sparse scrubland, caliche soils; sea level to 3,000 meters
Adult body length	6–8 inches (head to tail base)
Tail length	Approximately 5–6 inches; tufted and darker at the tip
Adult weight	250–300 grams
Typical lifespan	6–8 years with good care
Activity pattern	Diurnal and crepuscular — most active in daylight and early evening; not nocturnal
Social structure	Strictly social — minimum two; groups of two to four are standard; never kept alone
Teeth color	Orange-yellow — iron compounds in the enamel produce this pigmentation naturally; it is not staining, disease, or abnormal in any way
Vocalization	Highly vocal — extensive chirping, whistling, barking, and chattering vocabulary with at least fifteen distinct call types documented in research

How degus differ from rats and chinchillas

New owners regularly encounter one of two comparisons: "is a degu like a rat?" or "is a degu like a chinchilla?" The answers are yes in body plan and no in almost every care requirement. Degus have the alert, inquisitive face and quick confident movement of a rat, and their social intelligence and curiosity translate into a human-interaction style that rat owners find immediately familiar. But their dietary restrictions, temperature requirements, and metabolic vulnerabilities are nothing like a rat's — a rat can eat fruit, tolerate warm rooms, and live comfortably alone, none of which applies to a degu.

The chinchilla comparison holds more tightly on the care side: similar temperature and humidity requirements, the same sand-bath grooming behavior, the same hay-based diet, the same sensitivity to heat, and a superficially similar body shape. The meaningful differences are size (degus are noticeably smaller), lifespan (chinchillas live 10–15 years versus the degu's 6–8), and the diabetes vulnerability — chinchillas do not share the degu's extreme insulin-regulation problem, though they also benefit from a low-sugar diet. If you have kept chinchillas before, degu care will feel immediately legible and the principles transfer directly. You are simply adjusting for a smaller animal with an even less forgiving relationship with dietary sugar.

Vocal communication

Degus are among the most vocal small mammals in captivity, and this is one of the genuinely delightful surprises for new owners. They have at least fifteen distinct vocalization types documented in behavioral research: contact calls that function as constant group check-ins; alarm whistles that send every animal in the group into hiding simultaneously; soft chirping that accompanies grooming and feeding; low-frequency grumbling signaling mild displeasure; and a trilling warble that appears to function as pure contentment. Bonded degus maintain a near-constant low background murmur during active hours that becomes immediately recognizable. A degu who goes quiet and does not vocalize when the rest of the group is calling is a degu worth watching closely.

What surprises new owners

The activity level during daylight hours is the first genuine surprise. Unlike a hamster who sleeps when the household is awake and runs a wheel at 2 a.m., degus are active and visible during normal family hours. They follow movement outside the cage, chirp when you walk in the room, and will work a puzzle feeder in clear view on a Tuesday afternoon. This is one of their strongest practical advantages as a pet.

The second surprise is speed. Degus move considerably faster than most new owners anticipate from an animal their size — blink-and-miss-it quick, capable of crossing a table in under a second. Early handling sessions feel chaotic until the animals build enough trust to slow down and investigate rather than flee. This settles completely with consistent socialization, but it catches most first-time degu owners off guard.

The third surprise, and the one that carries the most physical urgency, is the fragility of the tail. Many new owners instinctively reach to catch a fast-moving animal by whatever part they can reach. If that part is the tail — **even gently, even briefly** — the skin can peel off in a traumatic degloving injury that requires same-day veterinary care. This is not a freak accident; it is a well-documented reflex defense mechanism. We cover it in detail in the Handling section and the Common Challenges section both. Know it before you put your hands near the cage.

The fourth surprise: the orange-yellow teeth. First-time degu owners often find this alarming and immediately search for dental disease. The color is completely normal — iron compounds in degu tooth enamel produce a natural yellow-orange pigmentation that intensifies as the animal matures. Pale or white teeth in a degu are actually a potential indicator of nutritional deficiency. The color is not the issue; the shape and length of the teeth are what require monitoring.

SECTION 3

Enclosure Setup & Layout

Cage type and the importance of vertical space

Degus are climbers and jumpers who use vertical space aggressively. A cage that is wide but short wastes most of its potential. The practical minimum for two degus is approximately 24 inches wide by 16 inches deep by 24 inches tall, and this should be treated as a starting point rather than a generous allocation. Larger groups benefit substantially from a taller cage — 36 to 48 inches of vertical height accommodates three or four platform levels and produces a genuinely complex environment that reduces competition for space and keeps the group engaged.

The cage must be **wire bar construction** with no plastic interior components — not a tank or aquarium (inadequate ventilation, condensation buildup, no climbing opportunity), and not a habitat with plastic tubes or components that will be chewed and swallowed. Bar spacing of half an inch or less throughout the structure is essential. Mesh floors and wire platforms must be covered with solid hardwood boards, stone tiles, or metal sheets: wire underfoot causes **pododermatitis** (a painful inflammatory infection of the foot pads from chronic wire contact pressure) and catches toenails during fast movement.

Platform layout and the wheel placement

Three or four platform levels at different heights, connected by wooden ramps, rope ladders, or fixed branch diagonals, give the group a complex vertical territory that encourages climbing, jumping, and exploration throughout the day. Position the food dish and hay rack at a lower level where all animals can access them easily. Place the primary sleeping hide at a mid or upper level — degus feel safest when resting in an elevated position. The solid-surface wheel belongs on a lower platform with adequate clearance above and in front; a wheel positioned against a cage wall with no approach space or bumped by a platform above will go unused regardless of how well-suited it is otherwise.

The sand bath station

The sand bath is a required feature, not an optional accessory. Degus use sand bathing to remove excess skin oils and maintain their dense, soft coat — without it, the coat becomes progressively greasy, matted, and prone to skin irritation. Use **chinchilla sand** in a ceramic or metal container large enough for the degu to roll inside fully. Place the bath in the enclosure for two to three sessions per week of 20 to 30 minutes each, then remove it. Do not leave the sand bath in permanently — degus will use it as a latrine within a day or two, making it worse than useless. Replace the sand completely when it becomes damp or visibly soiled, and do not add fresh sand on top of fouled sand.

The no-plastic rule

No plastic inside the degu enclosure. Degus chew constantly, instinctively, and regardless of whether the plastic item appears interesting to them. They will chew a plastic platform because they encountered it while running. They will chew a plastic hide because they were sitting next to it. Ingested plastic fragments are sharp, indigestible, and capable of causing GI obstruction at even small amounts. Replace plastic food dishes, platform surfaces, tunnels, hides, and toys with ceramic, metal, hardwood, cork, or rope equivalents before the first degu enters the space. This is not a minor quality-of-life upgrade — it is a safety requirement.

SECTION 4

Substrate Guide

Substrate for degus must be low-dust (respiratory health), absorbent enough for the waste output of an active group, and completely free of aromatic compounds. Degus are sensitive to the volatile phenols and terpenes found in cedar and untreated pine — chronic low-grade respiratory irritation from aromatic bedding can run for weeks before any visible symptoms appear, and by then the airways have been compromised.

Substrate	Best for	Notes
Paper-based bedding (Carefresh, Small Pet Select, etc.)	All ages; the safest all-around choice	Excellent absorbency; almost completely dust-free in quality grades; no aromatic compounds; easy to spot-clean; slightly higher cost than wood-based options
Aspen shavings (kiln-dried grade)	Adults; budget-conscious setups	Safe and low-aromatic; confirm specifically kiln-dried grade to minimize mold and dust; avoid fine dust grades that irritate airways
Hemp bedding	Adults; naturalistic setups	Low dust, good absorbency, no aromatics; less widely available than aspen or paper options but an excellent choice where stocked
Hay as a surface layer over primary substrate	All ages, as behavioral supplement	Adding a 1–2 inch hay layer on top of the primary bedding encourages natural foraging and nesting behavior; safe to ingest; provides visible foraging cue
Cedar shavings	Never — for any small mammal	Aromatic phenols in cedar are respiratory toxins; no safe use case at any concentration
Untreated pine shavings	Never	Same phenol concern as cedar; kiln-dried pine heat-treated and specifically certified for rodent use is a distinct product — confirm the specification or default to aspen
Scented or deodorized bedding products	Never	Any bedding with added fragrance, baking soda, or deodorizer compounds causes chronic airway irritation in degus; unscented only
Fluffy cotton nesting "fluff"	Avoid	Long synthetic fiber strands wrap around legs, toes, and genitals, causing circulation-compromising constrictions that often go unnoticed until tissue damage is already present; use shredded paper nest squares or hay for nesting material instead

The practical recommendation for most degu keepers: high-quality paper-based bedding at two to three inches depth, with a layer of fresh timothy hay on top, is the cleanest and safest starting approach at any experience level. Spot-clean daily, change the full substrate weekly or biweekly depending on group size and activity. A paper-plus-hay floor layer gives you a visible consumption cue and encourages natural behavior simultaneously.

SECTION 5

Temperature & Humidity — The 2 Factors

Degus have narrower environmental tolerances than almost any other commonly kept small mammal. Both temperature and humidity operate on tight windows, and both can kill at the extremes. The combination of high temperature and high humidity — which describes a normal summer afternoon in a closed bedroom or a warm basement — is especially dangerous and can produce heat stress faster than most owners expect.

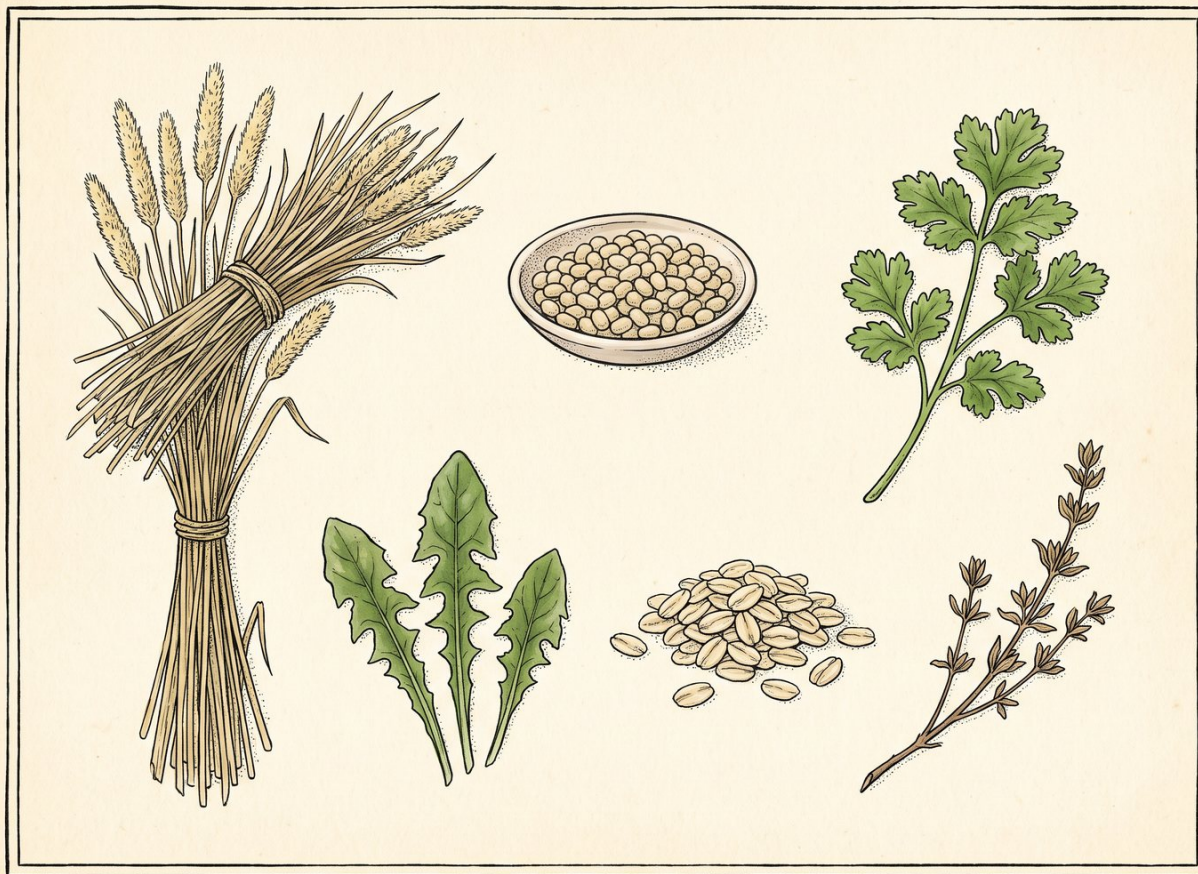
Parameter	Target	How to measure	What goes wrong when it's off
Ambient room temperature	65–72°F	Digital room thermometer mounted near the cage; check morning and afternoon since rooms shift significantly over a day	Below 60°F: cold stress, reduced immune function, huddling, sluggishness; above 75°F: heat stress begins; above 80°F: heat prostration, emergency territory
Relative humidity	Below 50%	Digital hygrometer mounted near the cage, away from direct sunlight and the water bottle	Above 60%: coat matting, elevated respiratory infection risk; above 70% combined with warm temperatures: heat stress and respiratory risk compound dramatically
Direct sunlight on the cage	Never	Visual check at different times of day as light angle shifts with season and time	Even brief direct sunlight through glass can raise internal cage temperature 10–15°F above room temperature within minutes
Drafts and air conditioning vents	Avoid direct proximity	Check for air movement near cage position before placement	Cold drafts cause respiratory illness; AC vents aimed at the cage can drop local temperature below the safe range unpredictably

Degus do not need supplemental heat sources in most US homes maintained at standard living temperatures. A room that stays in the 65–72°F range is the right environment — no heating pads, no heat lamps, no under-cage mats are appropriate under normal household conditions. What degus genuinely need is **protection from heat**. In summer, the degu cage belongs in the coolest, most consistently temperature-controlled room in the house. If your home runs warm in July and August, air conditioning specifically maintaining that room below 72°F is not excessive — it may be necessary. Do not position the cage near computers, televisions, appliances with heat-radiating backs, or any window that receives direct sun at any point during the day.

If a winter power outage drops the room temperature significantly below 65°F, wrapping three sides of the cage in a heavy blanket while leaving the front open for airflow provides meaningful insulation and buys safe time until heat is restored.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition — The Sugar-Free Imperative



Unlimited grass hay, plain low-sugar pellets and fresh herbs. No fruit, no carrots, no treats.

Degus are **obligate herbivores** whose metabolic machinery was built over millions of years in a landscape that offered essentially no dietary sugar. The dry Andean scrubland where degus evolved produces dry grasses, roots, bark, seeds, and sparse tough vegetation — a high-fiber, near-zero-fructose diet that their pancreas and liver are exquisitely optimized to process. What their metabolism is completely unprepared for is sucrose, fructose, glucose, or any of the sweetened foods that fill the small-pet sections of most retail stores.

Why diabetes is so common in degus

Degus have an **insulin regulation failure** that is strikingly similar to Type 2 diabetes mellitus in humans — so similar that researchers have used degus as an animal model for studying human diabetes for decades, because the underlying physiological mechanism is nearly identical. When a degu consumes sugar, blood glucose rises sharply. Their pancreas releases insulin in response, but the tissue response is impaired: glucose does not clear efficiently, blood glucose stays elevated, and the cycle of elevated glucose and compensatory insulin release repeats until the system begins to fail permanently.

The consequences of chronic dietary sugar exposure in degus are not subtle and are not reversible: **diabetic cataracts** (glycation of lens proteins causes the lens to cloud — this is often the first visible sign owners notice), fatty liver disease, progressive kidney function decline, and in advanced cases, generalized organ failure. A degu can develop visible cataracts within weeks of

consistent sugar exposure. Young degus presenting with cataracts at two or three years old almost always have a dietary history involving fruit, commercial hamster mixes with dried fruit, yogurt drops, or honey sticks. The sugar in these foods is not a minor dietary concern — it is the leading cause of premature death in captive degus, and it is entirely preventable.

What the correct diet looks like in practice

The foundation of every degu's day is **unlimited fresh timothy hay or orchard grass hay**, available constantly and never running out. This is not supplemental roughage — hay is the centerpiece of the diet and should make up the majority of what the degu consumes by volume. Hay keeps the teeth worn correctly (degu incisors and cheek teeth grow throughout life and require constant lateral grinding on fibrous material to maintain the correct bite), maintains gut motility, and provides the high-fiber caloric base the degu's gut flora requires to function. A group should visibly reduce their hay supply from one day to the next; if the hay level is barely changing, investigate hay quality, freshness, and whether the rack is positioned accessibly.

Degu-specific or chinchilla pellets with no added sugar are the correct supplementary concentrated food source — approximately one to two level tablespoons per animal per day. This amount supplements the hay diet without displacing it. Read the pellet ingredient list every time you buy a new bag. Reject any pellet listing fructose, sucrose, molasses, corn syrup, dried fruit, honey, or any form of sweetener anywhere in the ingredients. Many commercially available small-pet pellets — including some marketed specifically for degus — contain sugar. The ingredient list is the only reliable guide, and "natural flavors" on a small-pet pellet label is a phrase worth scrutinizing.

Safe fresh foods may be offered in small amounts several times per week as enrichment and variety:

Safe food	Notes
Timothy hay or orchard grass hay	Unlimited; the dietary foundation — never let it run out
Degu-specific or chinchilla pellets (no added sugar)	1–2 level tablespoons per animal per day
Fresh flat-leaf parsley	Small handful two to three times per week
Fresh cilantro	Small handful two to three times per week
Fresh dandelion greens (pesticide-free)	Excellent; offer freely; check source for pesticide use
Romaine lettuce	Small amount; higher water content, offer in moderation
Fresh kale	Small amount; nutritious but high in calcium — limit to once or twice per week
Dried rose hips (no sugar added)	Good vitamin C source; a few pieces per week
Raw oat groats or rolled oats (plain, unsweetened)	A small pinch one to two times per week only
Dried herbs — rosemary, thyme, chamomile (dried, no additives)	Very small amounts as enrichment; check labels
Plain barley flakes (no sugar, no additives)	A few flakes once or twice per week

Foods to never offer, under any circumstances:

Never feed	Why
Any fruit — fresh, dried, frozen, or freeze-dried	All fruit contains fructose; even tiny amounts cause blood glucose spikes that accumulate to permanent damage; no exceptions
Carrots	High sugar content; frequently given as "healthy treats" by well-meaning owners — they cause the same slow-accumulating blood glucose damage as fruit

Never feed	Why
Corn (any form)	High sugar and starch; off the list entirely
Peas	High sugar content
Sweet potatoes or white potatoes	High starch and sugar
Beets	High sugar
Yogurt drops	Pure sugar; one of the most common dietary mistakes; marketed prominently alongside degu and chinchilla products in many stores
Honey sticks	Pure sugar; frequently sold adjacent to appropriate degu food
Treats marketed for hamsters or rats	Almost all contain dried fruit, sugar-coated seeds, yogurt coating, or honey; these products are not appropriate for degus regardless of the retail placement
Sunflower seeds in quantity	Very high fat; a few seeds as an occasional training treat only; not a regular food source
Nuts	High fat; occasional treat, very small amounts
Bread, crackers, pasta, rice cakes	Processed starch converts to glucose rapidly; no nutritional benefit over hay

Reading labels for hidden sugar

Sugar appears under a wide range of names on ingredient lists. Any of the following disqualify a pellet or treat from use with degus: **sucrose, fructose, glucose, dextrose, corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, molasses, honey, maltose, evaporated cane juice, fruit juice concentrate, dried fruit of any kind, dehydrated carrot, dehydrated beet, apple pomace**. The safest pellet ingredient list reads approximately: timothy grass, orchard grass, soybean hulls, soybean meal, calcium carbonate, sodium chloride, vitamins and minerals — fiber sources, protein sources, minerals, and vitamins, and nothing beyond that.

What to do if you accidentally offered a sugary food

It happens — a child in the family offers a piece of strawberry through the bars before anyone can stop them, or a well-meaning guest provides a yogurt drop. Do not panic, and do not overcorrect with drastically changed diet. A single small accidental exposure is unlikely to cause lasting harm. Remove any uneaten portion, return to the correct diet immediately and without exception, and simply do not repeat it. What causes diabetes in degus is repeated chronic exposure over weeks and months — the cumulative blood glucose load, not a single incident. If a degu has been receiving sugary foods regularly for a significant period — weeks or months — schedule a vet appointment to discuss baseline bloodwork and current health status. If you notice any cloudiness developing in either eye at any age, see a vet promptly; diabetic cataracts are one of the most recognizable signs of chronic dietary sugar damage and their appearance means the process is already well underway.

Coprophagy — normal and necessary

One degu behavior that alarms new owners is **coprophagy** — the deliberate eating of soft fecal pellets directly from the anus. This is completely normal, completely necessary, and must never be prevented. Degus, like rabbits and guinea pigs, produce two types of feces: hard dry pellets that are waste, and soft nutrient-dense cecotropes produced in the hindgut that are rich in B vitamins, protein, and beneficial gut flora. Cecotropes are consumed directly from the anus as part of the normal digestive cycle. A degu prevented from coprophagy will develop nutritional deficiencies over time. Do not attempt to stop it, do not clean cecotropes out of the enclosure before the animal can consume them, and do not interpret it as poor health or unsanitary behavior.

Shop the food and supplies: Browse Critter Food Treats & Feed.

SECTION 7

Grooming & Maintenance

Sand bath protocol in practice

Two to three sand bath sessions per week of 20 to 30 minutes each is the correct maintenance frequency for most degus in normal conditions. Place the bath inside the enclosure, allow the animals to use it freely — they will roll, dig, and distribute sand enthusiastically — then remove it. A ceramic container with high sides reduces the amount of sand escaping into the rest of the cage, though some dispersal is normal and inevitable. Replace the sand completely when it becomes damp, discolored, or visibly soiled; do not add fresh sand on top of fouled material. If a degu's coat consistently appears greasy, dull, or carries an unusual odor despite regular baths, offer sessions more frequently for one to two weeks. Coat condition that does not respond to increased sand access warrants a vet check for skin infection or mite infestation.

Nail trimming

Degu nails wear down naturally through normal activity on wooden platforms, branches, digging substrate, and the coarse sand of the bath. Many well-housed degus never require active nail trimming if the enclosure provides sufficient abrasive surfaces. When trimming is needed, the frequency is considerably less than for guinea pigs or rabbits — typically every few months for an active animal in a properly furnished cage. Use small sharp nail scissors or rodent-specific nail clippers. Hold the degu securely in a soft towel wrap with one paw exposed at a time. Clip only the transparent tip, well above the pink vascular **quickness** (the blood vessel visible as a pink line running partway down the nail in a good light). Two-person trimming — one person holding the animal securely, the other handling the clippers — is considerably safer and less stressful than solo attempts.

Teeth monitoring

Healthy degu incisors are **orange-yellow** — this color is caused by iron compounds in the enamel and is completely normal and expected. Pale or white incisors indicate a potential nutritional or metabolic problem and warrant veterinary discussion. What matters for routine assessment is the bite: the upper and lower incisors should meet evenly in a functional occlusion with the upper incisors just slightly in front of the lowers when the mouth is closed. The mouth should close completely with no visible tooth protruding. **Malocclusion** — the progressive misalignment of teeth caused by insufficient hay consumption — is extremely common in captive degus and produces overgrown or angled incisors that no longer meet correctly. Signs to watch for: drooling, wet chin, visible difficulty chewing, preference for soft foods over hay, and weight loss. Any of these symptoms should prompt a vet appointment within a few days, not a wait-and-see period.

Coat condition assessment

A healthy degu coat is dense, soft, uniformly textured, and clean-smelling after regular sand baths. Signs that warrant closer attention: patchy thinning in any area, bald spots at any location on the body, visible redness or scaliness on exposed skin, or areas of broken and uneven fur that may indicate barbering behavior within the group. Degus in optimal health groom each other constantly — mutual grooming is one of the primary social bonding behaviors in the species, and its complete absence from a group is a meaningful behavioral signal worth noting.

SECTION 8

Common Challenges & Solutions

Diabetes and cataracts

What you see: one or both eyes developing a cloudy, opaque, or bluish-white appearance — often at two to four years of age, sometimes earlier with significant dietary sugar exposure; the animal may bump into cage furnishings or appear less visually oriented; weight changes; increased thirst and urination; in advanced stages, lethargy and appetite loss. **Why:** chronic dietary sugar exposure causes glycation of lens proteins — glucose molecules coat the proteins of the eye's lens and cause them to aggregate and opacify, exactly as in human diabetic cataracts. This is the same mechanism behind Type 2 diabetes complications in humans, and degus develop it through the same pathway. **What to do:** if cataracts are already visible, the dietary damage that caused them has already occurred and is not reversible. Eliminate every trace of dietary sugar immediately and consult a vet for metabolic assessment and guidance on supporting the animal's quality of life going forward. **When to call a vet:** at the first sign of any cloudiness in either eye; also promptly if the animal shows increased thirst and urination, significant weight change, or lethargy, even before visible eye changes appear.

Tail degloving

What you see: partial or complete peeling of the skin from the tail, sometimes down to the bone; often discovered directly after a handling moment where the tail was grasped; in partial degloving, skin peels back but may not have fully detached. **Why:** degus possess a defensive reflex that allows the tail skin to detach at any real grasping force — in the wild, this allows the animal to escape a predator who has caught only the tail. A well-meaning person grabbing a fleeing degu triggers the exact same reflex. **Fur slip** (where a patch of body fur releases rather than skin) is a related but less serious version of the same reflex and does not require veterinary care unless the skin beneath is damaged. Tail degloving, by contrast, is a wound — exposed tail bone is not manageable at home, and the injury carries a high infection risk without prompt veterinary intervention. **What to do:** keep the degu calm and warm; do not attempt to bandage or wrap the tail at home; see a vet the same day. Depending on the extent of injury, the affected portion of the tail may be amputated at a healthy point to allow proper healing. Degus adapt to tail amputation well and live normal lives afterward. **When to call a vet:** same day, no exceptions.

Declanning

What you see: a previously harmonious group suddenly showing aggression toward one specific member — chasing, biting, blocking access to food and water, pulling fur; the targeted animal may have visible wounds, lose weight, or spend all available time huddled in a corner or pressed against the cage bars. **Why:** **declanning** is a degu-specific social phenomenon in which a group collectively drives out one of its members. It can occur after a change in group composition, after illness that required temporary separation of one animal, after puberty onset in younger animals, or apparently spontaneously. The mechanism is not fully understood, but the outcome is consistent: a declanned degu that remains in contact with its attackers will be progressively injured and can die from stress and physical trauma within days if not separated. **What to do:** separate the targeted animal immediately into a temporary individual setup, away from the group, and assess for wounds. A declanned degu cannot be reintegrated into the original group — the social bond has broken in a way that does not heal. Long-term options include finding a new compatible partner through a careful neutral-zone introduction process, or pairing with an unrelated degu from outside the original group. **When to call a vet:** if the separated animal has bite wounds, is in obvious pain, or shows signs of significant weight loss or systemic stress.

Fur slip

What you see: a patch of fur releases from the body, leaving a short-furred or nearly bare area — typically noticed on the back, sides, or neck after a stressful handling interaction or rough catch. **Why:** the same defensive reflex underlying tail degloving, applied to body fur — the follicles release hair shafts collectively when the skin is compressed in a grabbing motion. Unlike tail

degloving, fur slip does not involve skin injury and regrows fully in four to eight weeks. **What to do:** no medical treatment is needed. Review handling technique immediately — the cupping method rather than any grasping approach; if children handled the animal, review the handling rules with them before the next session. **When to call a vet:** only if the area beneath the released fur appears red, broken, or shows any sign of skin damage.

Respiratory infection

What you see: sneezing, clear or discolored nasal discharge, labored or rapid breathing, reduced activity, appetite loss, unusual discharge from the eyes. **Why:** bacterial or occasionally viral upper or lower respiratory infections; most commonly triggered by exposure to aromatic bedding materials (cedar, pine, scented products), consistently high humidity above 60%, drafts, or immune suppression from heat stress or chronic social stress. **What to do:** immediately check the enclosure environment — rule out cedar or pine bedding, confirm humidity is below 50%, check for drafts from vents or windows. Isolate the affected animal if symptoms are severe or multiple animals appear affected simultaneously. **When to call a vet:** within 24–48 hours of noticing any respiratory symptoms; small mammals deteriorate rapidly with untreated respiratory infections, and these respond well to early veterinary intervention and poorly to delayed treatment.

Malocclusion and dental disease

What you see: drooling or visible wet fur around the chin and chest; selective eating where soft items are favored and hay and pellets are avoided or dropped; progressive weight loss; reduced self-grooming; pawing at the mouth; in advanced cases, the animal stops eating almost entirely and sits hunched and inactive. **Why:** **malocclusion** (progressive misalignment of the incisors or cheek teeth such that they no longer meet correctly, causing overgrowth, spurs, and eventually ulceration of the tongue and cheek tissue) is extremely common in captive degus and is almost always traceable to insufficient hay intake. Degu teeth grow throughout life and require constant lateral grinding action against coarse fibrous hay to maintain correct alignment. A degu fed primarily pellets without adequate hay will develop progressive dental misalignment within months. **What to do:** maximize hay availability and intake immediately; ensure the hay rack is always fully stocked with fresh, palatable material. **When to call a vet:** promptly at the first sign of any of the above symptoms — dental disease in degus advances quickly and almost always requires veterinary dental examination, and frequently corrective filing or extraction under anesthesia. This is not a wait-and-see condition.

Mites and skin parasites

What you see: intense scratching, especially around the face, ears, and neck; fur thinning or loss in scratched areas; visible small moving specks in the fur; skin redness, scaling, or crusting visible on the ears or around the eyes. **Why:** several mite species infest degus, with fur mites and mange mites (*Trixacarus* species) the most frequently encountered; typically introduced through new animals coming from a pet store or breeder, contaminated bedding material, or contact with an infested population at an expo or fair. **What to do:** quarantine the affected animal; take it to a vet for species identification and appropriate prescription treatment — many mite species require antiparasitic medication applied at precise intervals to interrupt the egg-hatch cycle. Replace all bedding and sanitize all enclosure surfaces during treatment. **When to call a vet:** promptly; mites spread rapidly within a group and cause significant skin damage and distress if not addressed efficiently.

Heat stress

What you see: a degu lying flat and splayed on the cage floor rather than in a hide or on a platform; limp, unresponsive posture; rapid shallow breathing; failure to react to normal stimuli; in severe cases, convulsions. These are emergency signs — they do not mean "the degu seems warm." **Why:** degus have essentially no ability to thermoregulate through heat; they do not pant effectively and cannot sweat. Their insulating fur compounds the problem in warm conditions. Room temperatures above 75°F combined with any humidity above 40% begin producing measurable physiological stress; above 80°F, serious heat prostration can develop within hours. **What to do:** move the cage immediately to the coolest accessible location in the house. Offer cool — not ice-cold — water. Drape a cool damp cloth over part of the cage exterior but not directly on the animals. Run a fan across the room but not directly at the cage. If the animal is unresponsive or convulsing, go to the vet immediately. **When to call a vet:** immediately if the degu is unresponsive, convulsing, or does not show meaningful improvement within 15–20 minutes of environmental cooling.

Barbering and dominance fur loss

What you see: one or more animals in the group with noticeably shorter, irregular, or patchy fur — particularly on the face, ears, shoulders, and back — while other group members have normal coats; the affected animals are otherwise eating, moving, and vocalizing normally. **Why: barbering** is a dominance behavior in which one animal chews the fur of a subordinate group member, usually without breaking the skin. It can represent a stable dominance hierarchy or an escalating social tension depending on frequency and the behavior of the involved animals. **What to do:** evaluate whether subordinate animals have full unrestricted access to food, water, hay, and hide space — competition for limited resources is the most common trigger. Adding a second food station and a second hide frequently resolves barbering by removing the resource pressure driving it. Barbering that does not cause skin injury and is not escalating over weeks is manageable through environmental adjustment; barbering that produces wounds or prevents normal feeding patterns signals social dysfunction that may require the group to be restructured. **When to call a vet:** if barbered skin is damaged, infected, or if the affected animal shows weight loss or other health changes.

Quick reference

What you see	Likely cause	What to do	Vet urgency
Cloudy or opaque eye(s); weight change; increased thirst	Diabetes / cataracts from dietary sugar	Eliminate all sugar immediately; assess full diet	Schedule within a few days
Tail skin peeling or peeled off completely	Tail degloving	Keep calm and warm; no home bandaging	Same day — no exceptions
Group suddenly attacking one member; wounds on target	Declanning	Separate immediately	If wounds or weight loss present
Patch of fur released during handling; no skin damage	Fur slip	Review handling technique; no treatment	Only if skin is red or broken
Sneezing; nasal discharge; labored breathing	Respiratory infection	Rule out aromatic bedding; reduce humidity	Within 24–48 hours
Drooling; wet chin; weight loss; avoids hay	Malocclusion / dental disease	Maximize hay; see vet	Promptly — do not delay
Intense scratching; fur loss; skin redness or scaling	Mites	Quarantine; vet for ID and prescription treatment	Promptly
Flat and splayed; rapid breathing; limp	Heat stress	Cool the room immediately; cool damp cloth near cage	Immediately if unresponsive
One animal with patchy short fur; others normal	Barbering / dominance	Add food station and second hide; monitor trend	If skin is damaged

SECTION 9

Handling & Socialization

The tail rule — know this before anything else

Never grab, hold, touch with intent to restrain, or brush against a degu's tail. Not gently. Not for a fraction of a second. The tail skin detaches in a defensive reflex at any real grasping pressure — partial degloving is a same-day veterinary emergency, and full degloving down to the bone requires amputation of the affected section. This catches new owners off guard because the instinct to stop a fleeing small animal is to catch whatever you can reach. Practice deliberate, intentional handling from the very first interaction so that the cupping approach becomes automatic, not something you have to consciously remember in the moment when a degu is moving fast.

The cupping technique

The correct method for picking up a degu is **cupping**: place one or both hands flat on either side of the degu's body with the animal sitting in the cradle of your palm, fingers gently curved around the sides without gripping or pinching. Scoop smoothly upward rather than grabbing. Degus do not like to feel physically restrained, and a loose cup that allows some movement produces a calmer animal than a tight hand that pins them. Support the full body at all times; a degu hanging from a grip with the hindquarters unsupported will kick, twist, and scramble. Work close to a surface until trust is established — a fall from standing height onto a hard floor causes real injury.

Building trust through consistent low-pressure contact

Degus require patient, consistent socialization over weeks to become comfortable with regular handling — and this investment pays dividends for years. Do not rush the early phase. In the first week, sitting near the cage and speaking in a quiet, low voice is genuine progress. In the second week, offer dried herbs or a few oat groats from an open palm inside the cage — make no move toward the degu; let them come to you. Most degus begin stepping voluntarily onto an offered hand within two to three weeks of this approach. Once they are stepping onto the hand for food, gradually extending the duration of contact builds confidence quickly. A fully socialized degu will often initiate contact by moving to the front of the cage when you enter the room, calling softly, and stepping onto your hand without any food prompt.

Children

Degus can be excellent animals for children who are old enough to understand and apply the handling rules — particularly the tail rule — with real consistency. Children under six should be supervised continuously and should handle a degu only while seated on the floor with an adult's hands immediately underneath as a safety net. A direct, honest explanation of what happens if the tail is grabbed — "the skin comes off and the degu has to go to the vet for surgery" — is remarkably effective with children old enough to understand consequences. Older children who have demonstrated patience and gentleness with other animals typically do very well with degus once the initial fast-and-startled phase of socialization is past.

SECTION 10

Routine Care Calendar

How often	What to do
Daily	Check hay supply — replenish immediately if low or fully depleted
Daily	Check water bottle for proper flow; replace water; clean the sipper nozzle if any buildup is visible
Daily	Check food dish; remove any uneaten fresh herbs or greens from the prior day
Daily	Spot-clean — remove visible droppings, soiled substrate patches, and any wet areas
Daily	Observe all animals: are all present, eating, and moving normally? Any visible wounds, changes in behavior, or unusual posture?
Daily	Check room temperature; note in a log if outside the 65–72°F target range
2–3 times per week	Offer sand bath for 20–30 minutes; remove and store the bath after each session
2–3 times per week	Offer a small portion of safe fresh herbs as variety and enrichment
Weekly	Full or deep spot substrate change depending on group size and soil level
Weekly	Wash food dish and water bottle sipper with mild unscented soap; dry fully before replacing
Weekly	Visual health check of each individual: eyes clear? Weight appearance stable? Coat in normal condition? Any wounds?
Weekly	Inspect all platforms, ramps, cage structure, and hardware for wear, sharp edges, or broken components
Monthly	Full cage cleaning — remove all furnishings, scrub all cage surfaces with a small-animal-safe disinfectant, dry completely before reassembling
Monthly	Replace sand in the sand bath container completely with fresh sand
Monthly	Photograph each animal from above for a body-condition baseline to compare across months
Every 3–6 months	Assess nail length; trim if nails are catching or curling
Annually	Exotic small mammal vet wellness check; fecal exam for internal parasites; discuss metabolic bloodwork for any animal over three years old or with any history of dietary sugar exposure or behavioral changes

SECTION 11

When to See a Vet

Degus can deteriorate quickly once illness is established — their small body mass provides little physiological reserve once a problem is underway. The rule is simple: **when you are not sure whether to call, call.** A two-minute phone conversation with a vet who knows small mammals costs nothing and prevents the far harder conversation that comes from waiting too long.

Go today — same-day or emergency:

- Any tail degloving, even partial
- A degu lying flat, splayed, or completely limp — possible heat stress or systemic collapse
- Unresponsiveness to normal stimuli or any attempt at contact
- Convulsions or involuntary muscle movements
- Prolapse of any tissue from the anus or genital area
- Active bleeding that does not slow within a few minutes
- Audible labored breathing with visible full-body effort on each breath
- Complete refusal to eat or drink for 24 hours accompanied by lethargy or hunched posture

Book within a few days:

- Any cloudiness, opacity, or color change in either eye, at any age
- Drooling, wet chin fur, or obvious difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Sneezing or nasal discharge persisting beyond 48 hours
- Any animal significantly lighter than the others in the group, or showing visible body condition decline
- Persistent scratching with progressive fur loss and visible skin changes
- A degu being isolated by the group or showing early signs of declanning
- Wounds from fighting, even if the animal appears otherwise normal
- Any new firm lump, swelling, or body asymmetry anywhere
- Behavioral changes that persist for more than three to four days without an obvious environmental cause

Find your exotic small mammal vet before you need one — ideally before the degus come home. Confirm they have specific experience with degus, not just guinea pigs and rabbits. Bring a temperature log, a feeding record, and a fresh fecal sample in a sealed container to any scheduled appointment.

SECTION 12

FAQ

What do degus eat?

The foundation of every degu's diet is unlimited fresh timothy or orchard grass hay, available at all times and making up the majority of what they consume every day. Supplementary concentrated nutrition comes from degu-specific or chinchilla pellets with no added sugar — approximately one to two level tablespoons per animal per day. Small amounts of fresh low-sugar herbs and greens — flat-leaf parsley, cilantro, dandelion greens, romaine lettuce — may be offered several times per week. Plain oat groats or barley flakes in very small amounts are acceptable occasional variety. The entire diet should be oriented around high fiber and near-zero sugar at every meal. Degus do not eat insects, meat, or any animal products, and they should never be given commercial hamster or rat food mixes, which almost universally contain dried fruit, honey, or other sweeteners that are harmful to degus.

Can degus have fruit?

No — this is one of the few genuinely non-negotiable rules in degu keeping. Degus cannot process fructose the way most other mammals can. Their insulin regulation system is so poorly equipped for dietary sugar that even small amounts of fruit — a single blueberry, a sliver of apple, a pinch of raisin — cause blood glucose spikes that, repeated over time, cause diabetic cataracts, fatty liver disease, and kidney damage. No fruit at all: not fresh, not dried, not freeze-dried, not as a small reward, not occasionally. The same rule applies to anything containing fructose, sucrose, honey, or corn syrup in the ingredient list. If someone at a pet store tells you it is fine to give degus fruit as a treat, that advice is factually incorrect and your degu's long-term health depends on not following it.

How long do degus live?

With good care, degus typically live six to eight years — considerably longer than most small rodents and closer in lifespan to a rabbit than to a hamster or gerbil. Some individuals in optimal conditions reach nine or ten years. The factors most consistently associated with reaching the upper range are a correct sugar-free diet maintained from the start, consistent access to a running wheel and environmental enrichment that prevents boredom and sedentary behavior, temperatures held reliably in the 65–72°F range, social group living that prevents isolation stress, and annual veterinary care that identifies problems early. This is a genuine long-term commitment — more than most first-time small pet owners anticipate — and it deserves to be fully weighed before the first degu comes home.

Do degus need to live in groups?

Yes, unambiguously and without exception for the animal's wellbeing. Degus are among the most socially dependent small mammals kept in captivity. In the wild they live in colonial family groups of five to twenty or more individuals, spending every active hour in close social contact — grooming, vocalizing, playing, and foraging together. Single-housed degus in captivity develop behavioral profiles consistent with chronic stress and social deprivation: they stop using their wheels, begin repetitive stereotypic behaviors including constant bar-chewing, lose weight, and show elevated stress hormones. The minimum social group is two. Same-sex pairs — two males or two females — are standard and straightforward. Mixed-sex cohabitation requires neutered males. A group of three or four provides richer social dynamics and better behavioral outcomes than a pair.

Can I hold a degu by the tail?

Never, under any circumstances. Degus have a reflex that allows the skin of the tail to detach in response to being grasped — a survival mechanism from their wild environment where a predator catching the tail allows the degu to escape by sacrificing only the tail skin. A gentle, well-meaning grab by a person triggers exactly the same reflex. Partial degloving exposes living tissue and requires same-day veterinary care. Full degloving down to the bone requires amputation of the affected portion under anesthesia.

Degus adapt well to tail amputation and live normal lives afterward, but the injury is entirely preventable: always cup the degu from below and around the body, never reach for the tail under any circumstances, and teach every person in the household — especially children — this rule before they interact with the animal for the first time.

What is a sand bath for degus?

A sand bath is a container of coarse chinchilla sand that degus roll in to remove excess oil and maintain their coat. Degus are dry-environment animals who do not groom in water — instead, they evolved to maintain coat condition through sand rolling, which strips oils and debris from the dense fur in the same way that fine dry particles dislodge buildup from a tightly packed surface. Without regular sand bath access, a degu's coat becomes greasy, matted, and prone to skin irritation. Use chinchilla sand specifically — it is coarser than chinchilla dust, which is too fine for degus and causes respiratory irritation with regular use. Offer the bath two to three times per week for 20 to 30 minutes in a ceramic or metal container with high sides, then remove it. Do not leave the bath in permanently; degus will use it as a latrine quickly if it is always available.

Are degus good pets for beginners?

Degus are intermediate-difficulty pets — more demanding than a hamster or gerbil, and roughly comparable in care complexity to a chinchilla or a rabbit. The dietary restrictions around sugar are strict and require active attention every time food is purchased. The social requirement means you are always keeping at least two animals. Their care involves specific temperature and humidity management that most beginner small-pet setups do not require. The handling phase requires patience. What makes degus worthwhile despite this complexity is their personality: they are active during daylight hours, genuinely vocal and interactive in ways most small rodents are not, and form real bonds with their keepers over time. A person willing to learn the care requirements thoroughly, buy the correct setup, and commit to six to eight years will find degus deeply rewarding. Someone looking for a low-maintenance first pet should start with a species that offers more margin for error.

What temperature do degus need?

Degus need a stable ambient room temperature of 65 to 72°F — cooler than most other commonly kept small rodents and reflecting their origin in the cool, dry Andes. They begin showing signs of heat stress above 75°F, and temperatures above 80°F can progress to life-threatening heat prostration in hours. Unlike hamsters, gerbils, and guinea pigs, degus have essentially no effective ability to thermoregulate through heat — they cannot pant or sweat meaningfully. The cage should be placed in the coolest, most consistently climate-controlled room in the house, away from direct sunlight, away from heat-radiating appliances, and away from heating vents. In summer in a warm home, air conditioning specifically managing the room where the degus live is appropriate and may be necessary for their safety.

How do degus compare to chinchillas?

Degus and chinchillas are different species with genuinely overlapping care requirements, and prior chinchilla experience translates almost directly to degu keeping. Both need cool temperatures in the 65–72°F range, humidity consistently below 50%, a hay-centered diet with no added sugar, regular sand bath grooming sessions, a tall multi-level wire cage, and no plastic anywhere in the enclosure. Both have the fur-slip reflex, both live in social groups, and both are considerably more demanding than hamsters or gerbils. The main differences: degus are smaller and lighter (250–300 grams versus 400–600 grams for a chinchilla), have a shorter typical lifespan (6–8 years versus 10–15 years), and have an even more pronounced vulnerability to dietary sugar than chinchillas do — though chinchillas should also be kept on a low-sugar diet. Chinchilla pellets without added sugar are appropriate for degus when degu-specific pellets are unavailable. If you have kept chinchillas successfully, you already understand most of what degu keeping requires.

Do degus get diabetes?

Yes — and this is not a tendency found in some bloodlines or some feeding situations; it is a species-wide metabolic characteristic. Researchers use degus as an animal model for studying human Type 2 diabetes because the underlying mechanism is nearly identical: a pancreatic insulin response adapted for a near-zero-sugar diet that fails progressively when confronted with

regular sugar intake. When a degu consumes sugar over time, blood glucose rises, the insulin response is insufficient to clear it, and the cumulative effects of elevated blood glucose produce cataracts, liver disease, and kidney dysfunction. Diabetic cataracts — visible as cloudiness in the eye lens — are often the first sign owners notice, frequently appearing at two to four years of age in animals with sugary dietary histories. The only prevention is a completely sugar-free diet maintained from the very first day, without exceptions, for the entire length of the animal's life.

Ready to shop? Start with Critters!. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters. Not sure this is the right pet? Compare your options in our *Small Animal Guide*.

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not as a checkbox at checkout. Not as a quarterly pledge tied to hitting some revenue milestone. Off the top of every order, every day — because the same standard of care we are asking you to give your degus is what animals in shelters deserve, and we want to put our money where that conviction is.

Degus arrive at rescues more often than most people realize — usually surrendered by families who bought a single animal without knowing it needed a group, who were not told about the sugar restriction and are now dealing with a diabetic two-year-old with cataracts, or who did not fully consider a six-to-eight-year commitment when they brought home what looked like a small rodent in a pet store display. If you are reading this guide, you already know more than most of those families knew at the point of purchase. And if you have the option to adopt — small mammal rescues in most regions have degus and bonded degu pairs available, and an animal going into a home that knows what it is doing is the best possible outcome for everyone.

We are a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own food, keep our own animals, and stock only what we would put in front of our own pets — **no mystery ingredients**, no treats with hidden sugar marketed as "natural flavors," no products we would not buy ourselves. If you have a question about your degu's diet, a concern about a health sign you're not sure about, or you want to talk through a cage setup before spending money on something that might not work, call us at **(717) 983-8069**. We would rather answer a question for free than have one of your animals suffer from something that was easy to prevent.

Welcome to six to eight years of small animals who know your voice, argue with each other loudly every morning, and are waiting at the front of the cage when you walk in the room.

From our family to yours, Walnut Creek Supply — Christiana, Pennsylvania walnutcreeksupply.com