

# Degu care guide



**woodgreen**

Helping pets and their people

# Introduction to degus

Are you thinking about getting degus, wondering how to keep them happy and healthy, or just want to learn a bit more about these delightful creatures?

In this handy guide, we tackle these topics, and more, to help you decide if they're the right pets for you. And, if you already have degus, you might just learn something new!

Degus are energetic, cheeky and mischievous pets. They love nothing more than chewing up a cardboard box or darting along willow branches to oversee their 'kingdom'!

They're not necessarily an ideal first-time pet, but they can make a great addition to any home if you're keen to take on a pet that's different and fun.

## Fast facts

**Male name:** Buck. **Female name:** Doe.

**Life expectancy:** 5-8 years.

**Companionship:** Degus much prefer the company of their own kind and are most happy living in same sex pairs or small groups. A castrated male can live with one or more females.

**Accommodation:** Degus can be very active and enjoy exploring their surroundings. They can gnaw through plastic very easily, so they need a large metal cage with a metal floor.

**Diet:** Degus are herbivores and need plenty of good-quality hay, pellets and natural treats such as dried herbs, flowers and safe tree bark.

**Health:** Degus are generally quite healthy animals, but they can occasionally suffer from diabetes caused by a poor diet and tail injuries from incorrect handling. Find a rodent-friendly vet to ensure your degus receive the best possible care when needed.

**Family friendly:** Degus are often best suited to adult-only homes or families with older children. This is because they may find sudden loud noises to be frightening and don't enjoy being handled. Some degus really enjoy interacting with their humans, though! They might take food from your hands and climb over you during free-range play time.





# Accommodation

Degus might be little, but don't underestimate their energy! For this reason, they need plenty of space to run and jump around.

The minimum cage size for two to four degus:

123cm high by 93cm wide by 63cm deep (these dimensions do not include a cage stand). Bar spacing – up to 18mm.



## Where to place your cage

When you're choosing a location for your degu, make sure it's:

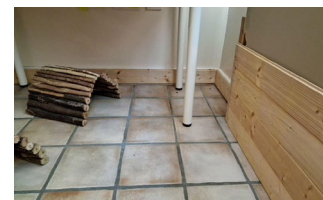
- away from busy areas and loud noises such as the TV or music system
- in a well-ventilated room to help prevent odours from building up
- away from windows and draughts
- in an area with low humidity
- away from direct/constant sunlight, although the room will need a natural daylight source
- away from radiators, or you can ensure they're switched off
- safe from other pets such as cats and dogs
- safe from young, unsupervised children.

## Free-range time

Once your degus are settled with your daily routine and are happy to feed from your hands, you can build up to free-range time for half an hour or more each day. This'll need to be in a secure room, ideally the same one where the cage is housed.

Your degus will love running around and jumping all over the place exploring, so you'll need to make sure the room is completely safe and degu-proof. This includes protecting all wires and removing any house plants. Degus really love to chew, so be prepared for their little teeth to gnaw through anything and everything they can reach – even your skirting boards! Fortunately, there are things you can do to prevent damage to your home. These include covering skirting boards with safe wood, attaching metal strips to any corners of the wall, and providing plenty of safe things for them to chew.

Free range time is a great opportunity to sit, socialise and even health check your degus. You can set up the space with lots of different toys for them to explore and interact with. They'll also enjoy climbing on you and using you as a lookout tower!



# Enrichment

Degus are very active and enjoy items in their cage that they can safely chew, jump on and dig in! Make sure to only furnish the cage with safe items that won't injure your degu.

## Your degus will enjoy:

- **Twigs, stumps and branches from apple, pear, or willow trees** (weeping or pussy willow only) for them to chew and jump on
- **Wooden or card boxes** for them to sleep in and chew on
- **Wooden platforms** – degus love to leap from level to level, and these are great for breaking up the space and preventing falls from a height
- **Hammocks made from anti-pill fleece**; like the wooden platforms, hammocks are great for allowing your degu to jump around and they also break up the space, helping to prevent falls
- **Card, ceramic or metal tunnels**
- **Toilet or kitchen rolls stuffed with hay**
- **Ceramic or granite tile** for helping them to keep cool in the summer months
- **Dig trays** – if your degus have a shallow cage base, why not give them a card box filled with a deep layer of hay, or a mixture of organic soil and sand for them to dig through and forage for food



- **Dust bath in a metal tray** for them to dust bathe in several times a week – avoid leaving it in all the time as they may start using it as a toilet and their skin may become overly dry
- **Minimum of a 12" solid metal upright wheel.**



## Avoid these degu toys:

- Plastic toys, as these will be destroyed very quickly and may become dangerous.
- Hanging toys like parrot or rodent ropes and swings aren't safe. Degus are very fast and reactive, so they can damage their legs or become caught on hanging items.
- Avoid any toys that the degus may trap their legs in while jumping and climbing around, like mesh ladders.
- Also avoid toys they can get their heads stuck in such as hanging hay balls and many hay racks.
- Take extra care and monitor individual degus with items that can easily be chewed such as card or paper, as these can cause blockages in the digestive system if swallowed.

## Bedding materials

It's important to use the right bedding for your degus or it could have a negative effect on their health. **Wood shavings or sawdust** can be very dusty and are a common cause of skin related issues. It's not just the degus who might have problems, these can give you an allergic reaction too!

Make sure your degus have a nice, soft bedding base for their cage rather than a mesh floor. This will avoid injury to their feet and help meet their natural behavioural and environmental needs.

Base of cage options	Nesting/comfy bedding to place in hiding spaces and on shelves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hemp bedding such as Aubiose (non-fragranced)</li> <li>• Greenmile – shredded card material</li> <li>• Aspen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft, short, sweet-smelling, good-quality meadow hay</li> </ul>



# Cleaning

Keeping your degu cage clean isn't just for show, it's key to preventing illness!

Daily – spot clean	Fortnightly – refresh clean
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Remove poo and wet/dirty bedding.</li><li>2. Replace dirty bedding.</li><li>3. Change their water.</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Place degus in a secure wire mesh carrier with plenty of bedding from their cage in the base, along with a hiding space.  Place the carrier in a safe, quiet space away from where you're cleaning.</li><li>2. Remove soiled toys, soiled or damaged enrichment items, and bottles, then clean them with pet-friendly disinfectant. Dispose of any toys which have been chewed and may become dangerous.</li><li>3. For any hammocks, wash in your washing machine with non-bio detergent at 60°C.</li><li>4. Fully sweep out their cage and wipe down with pet-friendly disinfectant.</li><li>5. Set up the enclosure with fresh bedding and place different enrichment in the cage for interest.</li></ol>



## Degu companionship

Degus are very social and absolutely love the companionship of other degus. You'll often spot them cosying up with each other. If you find yourself with a lone degu of any age, contact your local rescue centre to help find your degu a little companion.



### How many degus should you keep?

In the wild, degus live in communal groups and work together to protect their territory from others. They also help each other keep safe by making vocal alert sounds and body movements. And they love feeding and grooming together.

Degus should be housed in same-sex pairs, or a castrated male can live with one or more females.

## Introducing your degus to each other

### How to introduce them

Introducing degus to a new companion needs to be done with great care and patience. When doing this, it's best to use the 'side-by-side' (split mix) method. This involves having their cages side-by-side for at least two weeks (or up to four weeks), swapping some of the toys and bedding between the cages, to let them get used to the sight and scent of one another before introducing them in a neutral space. You may need to give them several 'play dates' in the

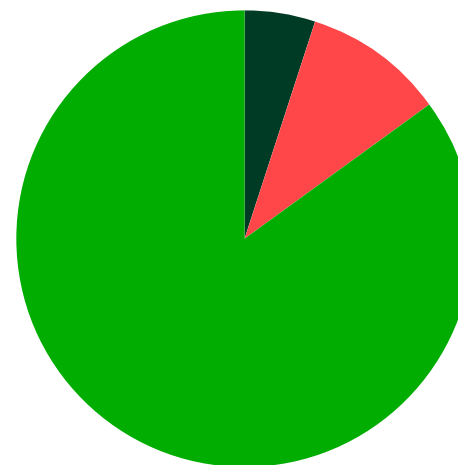
neutral area before they are comfortable enough in each other's company for a longer period. When you feel your degus are ready to live together, make sure you set up a clean cage for them which has no scent of either degu as a neutral territory.

If you would like more information or advice on how to introduce degus together, please do get in touch or visit our website: [woodgreen.org.uk/pet-advice/](http://woodgreen.org.uk/pet-advice/)

## Feeding your degus

Degus are herbivores, so they only eat plant-based food, not meat. Feeding your degus a good-quality diet will help avoid health conditions like dental disease and diabetes.

Your degus' diet should be made up of the following:



**85%**  
good-quality hay

**5%**  
good-quality  
degu pellet food

**10%**  
healthy forage

### Hay

Spread hay around their whole enclosure, on shelves and in hiding spaces. Degus need constant access to hay, as it makes up the largest portion of their diet. It's also great for helping to keep their teeth and gut healthy.

Offer a mixture of varieties such as:

- Timothy hay
- Meadow hay
- Orchard hay
- Alfalfa hay can be fed in small amounts as an occasional treat.



## Pellets

Feed each degu around 15g of pellets every day. Degus should not be fed muesli mixes because they're high in sugar and can lead to dental problems and selective feeding.

Mix things up at feeding time by scattering your degus' food around their enclosure instead of placing it in a bowl. They'll enjoy scurrying about, foraging and searching for it!

## Forage

As well as feeding your degus pelleted food, scatter around four tablespoons of healthy forage per degu, per day.

Below are examples of what you can feed degus each day. They'll need a variety of these foods, so only give each type in small amounts:

- Apple, pear, willow (weeping, or pussy willow only) or hazel tree twigs and branch cuttings.
- Rose wood, ideally remove any large thorns.
- Dried leaves such as apple, nettle, pear, dandelion, rose.
- Dried flowers such as marigold, dandelion, hibiscus, rose, cornflowers.
- Dried herbs and roots such as dandelion, parsley, rose petals.

## Healthy treats

(to be fed occasionally):

Avoid colourful chew sticks. Instead, stick to healthy, natural food options, just feeding them occasionally alongside their weekly diet:

- Dried rose hip (feed as an occasional treat).
- Rolled oats (feed sparingly, as this can cause gas).
- Fenugreek crunchies (feed as an occasional treat).
- Mallow root.
- Dried hibiscus flowers.

## Water

Your degus need access to fresh, clean water every day. Provide water in at least two bottles or securely mounted bowls in separate areas of the cage. If you have a large, two-tier cage, you can put a bottle or bowl on each level. That way, your degus can stay healthy and hydrated if one bottle or bowl breaks or spills.

# Handling your degus

**Degus are naturally fast and wriggly, and many don't enjoy being handled. When they arrive in their new home, leave them for a few days to allow them to settle before trying to get them out for some free-range time.**

## How to socialise your degus

Spend time socialising your degus to help them feel safe and confident around you, and they may learn to enjoy being handled in their own time. Slow and steady wins the race!

Take 10-20 minutes each evening to talk to your degus and offer a treat to encourage them to feed from your hands. Once they feel confident with this, offer them your arm to sniff and hop onto. Never try to grab your degu suddenly – it's scary and causes a lot of stress, so they may bite you. If your degus have become hand-tame, they might voluntarily climb into your hands or onto your arm. It's wonderful to feel chosen, but it's important not to rush this!





## How to pick up your degus

If you need to pick up your degu for health checking, giving treatment, or during free-range time:

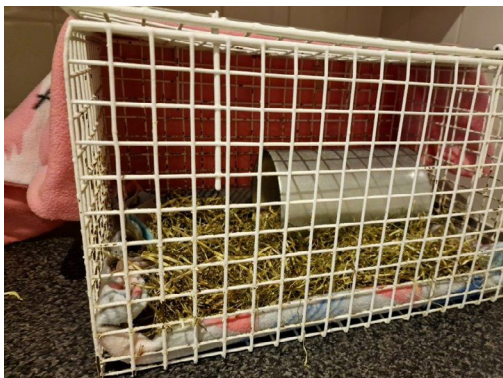
- Ensure they are alert and aware of your movements – quietly talking to your degu will let them know you're there.
- Place a tunnel out for them to walk into, allowing you to safely lift them without causing stress. Let them move forward onto your arm or lap in their own time.
- Alternatively, gently place one hand underneath them behind their front legs. Lift and support their rear end with the other hand, placing the degu into your arms.

## Never pick your degu up by the tail.

## Transporting your degus

It's important that you always have a suitable pet carrier available in case you need to take your degus to the vet, or to use whilst you clean out their enclosure.

Degus are experts at nibbling! They can very quickly chew through cardboard boxes and plastic carriers, leading to escapes. Wire mesh carriers like this one ↓ are perfect for your degus to use.



To keep them relaxed and happy, place some of the bedding from their cage in the base of the carrier, along with a small amount of scattered food and a house for them to hide away in. Cover the carrier with a towel or blanket to help your degus feel safe and secure.





# Finding a vet

It's really important to find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with degus. Most vets will see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs. But they might rarely see other species such as degus. So, finding someone who has lots of experience of seeing, diagnosing and treating these species is vital.

- **Look for an Exotics Veterinary Practice** – they may have more experience and might be cheaper in the long term than other vets.
- **Talk to friends and family** who own or have owned degus to see if there are any vets in particular they recommend.
- **Talk to veterinary practices** to find out if there are any degu-savvy vets within the practice – don't be afraid to ask them how many they see on a weekly basis to help you decide whether they're the right vet for you.

## Dental health

Degus are prone to dental problems. Unless they've inherited them from their parents, dental problems usually come from a poor diet, a fall, or even an inappropriate environment.

You'll only be able to easily see your degus' front set of teeth, known as the incisors, which should be dark orange in colour. The top and bottom set should meet nicely, be level, and not be at an angle.

**If you spot any of the following signs, your degu could have dental problems. Contact your vet if you have any concerns:**

- one or both eyes weeping
- drooling
- playing with food but not eating it completely
- teeth becoming lighter in colour
- teeth appearing to be growing apart or at an angle
- face appearing swollen or abscess appearing along their jaw line
- reduced amount or size of poop
- matted fur on the inside of their front legs or chin.

## Diabetes

Degus can be prone to diabetes, especially if they're fed an unsuitable diet which may include sugary treats like fruits and chew bars. If your degu has diabetes, you can manage the condition by improving their diet, but it's likely their health will gradually decline.



**Signs to look out for include:**

- cataracts
- excessive drinking
- excessive urinating
- unexpected weight gain, appearance of obesity.

If you suspect your degu has developed diabetes, arrange a vet check and consider the quality of their diet.

## Leg injuries

Degus are speedy little explorers, so if their environment isn't safe for them, they can get seriously injured. Furnish your degus' cage with fun activities to keep them occupied, avoiding any items that could trap their legs or they could become tangled up in. If you notice any change in your degus' movements or swellings in their legs, talk to your vet.

## Tail injuries

Tail injury or loss is common if your degus are handled incorrectly or have been in a fight with another degu. Degus can actually let their tail detach to escape a predator, sometimes called degloving. Either the skin and fur will detach from the tailbone, or the whole tail will come off. They need immediate veterinary treatment to clean and repair the wound as it's very painful. Because of this, make sure never to pick your degu up by the tail.



## Health checking your degus

Make sure you health check your degus every week or two, and look out for any changes in their behaviour every day. They can be very good at hiding any health issues until they're really suffering. If you have any concerns, act quickly and contact your degu-savvy vet.

### Skin, coat and tail should:

- be clean and healthy looking
- have no fur loss or matting
- have no red, flaky skin/dandruff
- have no wounds or scratches.

**Ears, nose and mouth** – should be clean and free of any discharge and flaky or scabby patches. No noisy breathing.

**Eyes** – bright, clean – free of any discharge or wetness. They should also be clear with no signs of cloudiness.

**Teeth** – top and bottom incisors (front teeth) should be dark orange in colour and wearing evenly against one another.

**Feet and toes** – should be free of any sores, dry/cracked skin, inflammation and signs of injury.

**Nails** – should be a regular length. Most will not need to have their claws/nails trimmed as they will naturally wear down while exploring.

**Body** – should be free of any 'lumps, bumps, scabs or wounds.'

**Bottom and genitals** – should be clean and dry.

**Weight** – use small scales, like kitchen scales, to monitor their weight. Look out for unexpected or consistent weight loss/gain.



# Looking for more expert pet advice?

We cover a range of different topics on our website – and not just for your small furry friends, but cats and dogs, too!

Not only that, but we also offer phone appointments, workshops, training classes, webinars and courses.

Find out more at [woodgreen.org.uk](https://woodgreen.org.uk),  
call **0300 303 9333**  
or email [info@woodgreen.org.uk](mailto:info@woodgreen.org.uk)



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