

ONE-STOP CHECKLIST FOR DEGUS

11 July 2013 Update

Disclaimer: The author of this checklist also created www.degugarden.com and has no formal training in degu or other animal care.

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This is a checklist for the beginner degu-keeper and does not replace the wealth of information provided by degu owners on the www.degus-international.org forum who have had much experience with degus. For links to other sources of information about degus see www.degugarden.com

The commitment: Before you decide to get degus, you should consider all of the items in this checklist. They are listed here as a summary and details are below. In addition, consider that: (1) degus are not suitable for children, (2) degus are observation animals rather than cuddly pets, (3) contact (if any) with degus needs to be strictly on the degus' terms, (4) degus can be very noisy, (5) degus can engage in serious fights, (6) healthy degus can live up to or more than ten years, (7) you will need to spend hours per day to care for your degus, (8) it will cost hundreds of dollars and many hours upfront to set up your degus' home, and (9) it will cost hundreds or thousands of dollars more each year for ongoing care and veterinary costs for your degus. If you cannot deal with any of these points for at least the next 5 to 10 years, you should consider another pet for your sake and for the degus' sake.

SUMMARY:

NEW MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY:

- 01.  First and foremost: Degus are social animals and need to be with a group of degus or at least with a degu partner.
- 02.  Sexing your Degus: When purchasing or adopting degus, it is wise to determine their gender yourself.
- 03.  No Breeding: Keep degus of the same gender together

FOOD AND DRINK:

- 04.  Species Appropriate and Balanced Diet: variety of specific, natural foods including leafy vegetables, but be cautious with carbohydrates, starch and sugars.
- 05.  Fresh Water: At all times degus need access to fresh water that is kept clean and replaced regularly, at least once per day.
- 06.  Fresh Hay for eating
- 07.  Wood for chewing, structure, climbing, resting and natural esthetics
- 08.  No plastic or other harmful materials: the degu cage, playpen, and free-running areas need to be Degu-Proofed

HOME SWEET HOME:

- 09.  Enclosure and Housing: Have the appropriate CARA for the number of degus you have
- 10.  Levels, shelves and ladders in the cage need to be solid metal or wood to prevent bumble foot
- 11.  Metal Running Wheels without spaces and minimum 13-inch diameter (preferably larger) or running disks or saucers

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12.  Substrate: kiln-dried wood and Timothy Hay or other appropriate material

13.  Shelving: create extra jumping and hiding room for your degus by installing shelves.

14.  Digging Box and/or Nest Box

15.  Natural Vegetation within the cage

16.  Playpen and/or Running Room

BEHAVIOUR:

17.  Degus are competitive and have a sense of fairness, so treat them equally.

18.  Introductions: Degus need to be introduced to each other carefully.

19.  Catching an Escaped Degu: Use a tube or other receptacle. Do not chase the degu; let the degu go to the tube or other receptacle.

20.  Enrichment: Train your Degus (if their other needs are met) and Create your own Degu Toys

HEALTH AND WELFARE:

21.  Room Temperature and Environment: 19 to 24 degrees celcius and quiet area without startling movements, noises or animals.

22.  Dust Bath: To keep your degus' fur clean, dry and soft.

23. **FRAGILE** Do not pull or pick up a degu by its tail, otherwise the tail will break off and will not regrow.

24.  Weigh your degus regularly and record important data

25.  Find a Veterinarian Now: Be prepared for an emergency before it happens

26.  Cleaning your degus' cage: Green soap for a wood cage and pet-safe cleaner or diluted vinegar for a metal cage; then rinse thoroughly and dry.

27.  Build your Own Metal Degu Exercise Wheel and/or Flying Saucer

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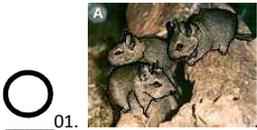
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DETAILS

NEW MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY:



01. First and foremost: Degus are social animals and need to be with a group of degus or at least with a degu partner.

Never Keep a Degu by Itself. If you are looking for an animal that can live alone, then degus are not for you.

If you really want to keep degus, it should not even be an option to keep a single specimen.

Most people who own pets want the best for them and want them to be happy.

In short, degus need each other to be healthy and happy! They communicate with each other, they keep each other feeling secure, they groom each other. They cuddle with each other.

A human cannot replace another degu.



02. Sexing your Degus: When purchasing or adopting degus, it is wise to determine their gender yourself. Also, when you get your degu home, double-check its gender. It is rather complicated to determine the gender of a degu and many pet stores are not able to do this correctly, mainly because both males and females have a structure that looks like a penis. However, once you know how to sex a degu, it is simple.

Locate their genital area, here you will find both the anal and urethral openings in both males and females. The primary difference between male and female degus is the distance between the urethral cone and anus. In females, the distance between these organs is very small - just a few millimetres. In males however the anal opening is situated further from the cone - about 1 centimetre.



If your degu isn't used to being handled, you can try some of the following tips:

Put your degu in a clear bowl or plastic container and look up at their bottom.

In a metal cage, let them climb up the bars and check their bits. If you're still not sure; compare each degus parts to the other degus, if they look the same they are likely the same gender.

Post photos of your degus' genitals on the www.degus-international.com forum and they will help.



03. No Breeding: Keep degus of the same gender together -- girls with girls and boys with boys. We do not recommend that you breed degus because it is difficult to find good homes for them. Therefore, degus should always be kept with other degus of the same sex. Boys get along with boys and girls get along with girls. Obviously, if you place boys and girls together, babies will result. In fact, degus reproduce very quickly with a gestation period of only 90 days. If two degus are allowed to reproduce freely, there will be more than 30 of them in one year, and more than 500 degus in two years. There is a section on the www.degus-international.org website that outlines the breeding process in case it becomes necessary to deal with a pregnancy. If a male and female must be kept together, the male should be neutered, but be very careful about the veterinarian chosen for this procedure. It is very risky and your degu can become very ill or die, especially if the veterinarian has little or no experience with this procedure for degus. Neutering can also be dangerous even if the veterinarian has had such experience. So neutering should be a last resort only if each degu cannot be paired with another of the same gender.

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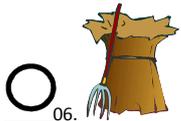
FOOD AND DRINK:



04. Species Appropriate and Balanced Diet: variety of specific, natural foods including leafy vegetables, but be cautious with carbohydrates, starch and sugars. Since degus cannot process sugar well they can get diabetes very easily. This will result in organ problems, blindness and ultimately death. There are currently developments regarding the food to be fed to degus, and you should refer to www.degus-international.org and www.degugarden.com for updates. For information on incorporating natural nutrition into your degus' diet, and for information on the Species Appropriate and Balanced Diet for degus, please see www.degus-international.org/forums/viewforum.php?f=62.



05. Fresh Water: At all times degus need access to fresh water that is kept clean and replaced regularly, at least once per day. Water bottles attached to the side of the cage are usually best because it keeps the water fresh. You can have a small bowl of water for your degus, especially for babies, however make sure it is kept clear of substrate and other materials. Also, you should change the water (whether in bottles or in a bowl) every day, whether it needs to be changed or not. Rinse the bottle and the spout every day because degus are prone to getting mouth infections. If the water bottle needs to be attached inside of the cage, you will need to get a glass water bottle, because your degus will chew a plastic one. Also, it is a good idea to have at least two water bottles so that there is a backup in case one stops working, and also to avoid your degus' arguing over who gets to drink! You will probably find that your degus drink relatively small amounts of water because they have learned to adapt to desert conditions by requiring small amounts of water.



06. Fresh Hay for eating. Degus need to be provided with a supply of fresh Hay that is always available. Degus need to eat a good quality Hay to help their digestion, and also to help keep their teeth ground down. In North America, Timothy Hay is sometimes the most readily available source. Alfalfa hay is high in calcium. Meadow Hay contains different kinds of grasses and weeds. Even though Hay may be used with wood shavings as the substrate, you should also have a hay feeder for fresh hay.



07. Wood for chewing, structure, climbing, resting and natural esthetics: Degus' teeth are forever growing. If grown too long, they can hurt the Degus' gums, mouth, and cut into skin. This is why Degus need wood in the form of branches, twigs, and wooden blocks to chew. This helps erode away teeth, keeping them at the ideal length, and provides entertainment. You may wish to add quite a few organic untreated apple wood branches and twigs with bark intact for additional chewing enjoyment. Other types of acceptable wood can be found on <http://www.Octodons.ch>, www.Degupedia.de, or www.degus-international.org. Woods have other purposes as well: they are useful behavioural enrichment for gnawing. Also, they provide structure in the degu enclosure, providing runways in bigger cages particularly if the branches are thicker and lying horizontally. Wood branches also provide structure for climbing when the twigs are branched. Branches act as horizontal perches as well as vertical segments for climbing and resting. Finally branches with fresh leaves are aesthetically pleasing. It is important to ensure that the type of wood is not toxic for degus. A list of woods for degus can be found at <http://gator549.hostgator.com/~raven999/forums/viewtopic.php?f=34&t=133&sid=4cd72e54de854c3d93582519df22ad3e>. If you are not sure whether a type of wood is safe for degus, it is best not to use it.

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08. No plastic or other harmful materials: the degu cage, playpen, and free-running areas need to be Degu-Proofed. Degus like to bite anything and everything in their cage and playpen, regardless of what material it is (metal, wood, plastic and cardboard). This chewing is perfectly natural behaviour. Therefore, you must remove from the cage and playpen all plastic, cardboard that is combined with glue, and other materials that are toxic to your degu. Plastic in the intestines or other organs can wreak havoc on your pet's health. Since degus are strong gnawers, you need to protect sensitive objects and material. Wooden cages have to be protected – wooden edges in a cage should be covered with stainless steel (not aluminium since degus can chew through aluminium) Also, flat portions of a wooden cage or playpen should not have protruding or uneven bits, as the degus will use these to begin chewing through the cage or playpen walls. Any room or area, such as the living room, the bathroom or a playpen, through which degus are allowed to run freely need to be made degu-proof. Unsuitable things such as electric wires, articles made of toxic material, precious items or anything that can harm the degus, should be removed, encased in stainless steel or kept out of the degus' reach.

HOME SWEET HOME:



09. Enclosure and Housing: Have the appropriate CARA for the number of degus you have. CARA is Cumulative Available Running Area, and is described more fully below. The www.degus-international.org website has a lot of information on how to build your own cage, how to adapt a metal or other purchased cage, and how big it should be. If you buy a cage, you may have to buy two or more and connect them as it is may be difficult to find one purchased cage big enough for your degus. See these websites for ideas about how to build your own cage or how to transform a metal cage to create a comfortable and healthy home for your degus: <http://octodondegus.weebly.com/how-to-build-a-degu-cage.html>

Another alternative is to have a degu-proof room or space dedicated permanently to your degus. An example of this is shown on www.degugarden.com where a playpen has been placed permanently around the room and the degus' cage is always open into the playpen. The result is that two degus have 53,000 square centimeters of CARA.

If you use a cage for your degus, the base of the cage needs to be solid metal or wood to prevent bumble foot. Any wire meshing should have no more than a 1.27cm x 1.27cm (1/2 in. x 1/2 in.) gap to prevent chances of escape for young Degus. Cages cannot be plastic or improperly constructed wood as Degus' teeth can break through in less than one night and you may never see your pets again. A glass aquarium style cage is only suitable as a base as there need to be plenty of air circulation and room to climb and explore. The base of the cage should be covered in wood shavings (some owners also use an additional layer of hay) to provide comfort and absorbance. The cage should be placed in a calm area, away from temperature fluctuations like extreme heat and cold, as this will make your Degus ill.

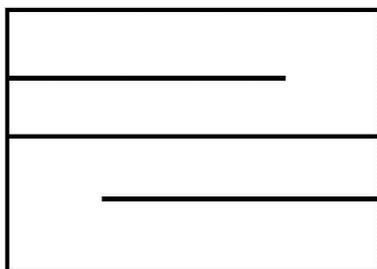
CARA (cumulative available running area) - A new way of calculating suitability of a cage, that is based on actual floor space rather than volume. <http://www.degus-international.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=29>

Degus need a lot of room to run and expend energy. In the wild they can run for kilometres each day. Therefore, the volume of an enclosure is not an accurate measure of the size of an enclosure that is appropriate for a degu. It is more important to measure the total or cumulative amount of available space or area on which the degus can run. This is called Cumulative Available Running Area (CARA).

How to calculate CARA ? This is easy:

- Take the measurements for all levels of your cage
- For each level multiply length by depth
- Add up values for all levels

This is an example for a four tier cage or enclosure with a depth of 50cm:



4 th level	80 x 50 = 4,000
3 rd level	100 x 50 = 5,000
2 nd level	60 x 50 = 3,000
Main 1 st level	100 x 50 = 5,000
Total CARA	17,000 square cm

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The enclosure size chart below gives two recommendations of how many degus can be kept in a cage or enclosure of a given size and compares these to the Degu Garden size. The first is for minimum cages and these values need to be met. (The minimum size for two degus is based on measures advised by the RSPCA). The second is recommended by the Degus International Forum and should be considered as a sensible compromise between the absolute minimum and ideal conditions... like a full room which remains unrealistic for most degu owners. The third "Size" column demonstrates that the Degu Garden size (i.e. the one shown on the www.degugarden.com website) is much larger (53,000 sq cm) for only two degus.

CARA minimum recommended

CARA in square centimeters	CARA in square inches	Minimum size	Recommended size	Degu Garden size
12,000	1,850	2		
13,000	2,000	2		
14,000	2,150	2		
15,000	2,300	3		
16,000	2,450	3		
17,000	2,600	3	2	
18,000	2,750	3	2	
19,000	2,900	4	2	
20,000	3,050	4	3	
21,000	3,200	4	3	
22,000	3,350	4	3	
23,000	3,500	5	3	
24,000	3,650	5	3	
25,000	3,800	5	4	
26,000	3,950	5	4	
27,000	4,100	6	4	
28,000	4,250		4	
29,000	4,400		4	
30,000	4,550		5	
31,000	4,700		5	
32,000	4,850		5	
33,000	5,000		5	
34,000	5,150		5	
35,000	5,300		6	
53,000				2



10. Levels, shelves and ladders in the cage need to be solid metal or wood to prevent bumle foot: You should replace or cover any steel ladders with wooden ladders.

Also, any mesh flooring needs to be covered with wood planks or ceramic tiles to prevent your degus from getting serious damage to their feet (this painful damage is known as bumlefoot). You may also wish to add additional wooden ladders (for example to help them get in and out of the digging box and for other connecting paths -- and for chewing delight). You also need to replace plastic floor covers with wooden tray covers that you may need to build.



11. Metal Running Wheels without spaces and minimum 13-inch diameter (preferably larger) or running disks or saucers. Wooden running wheels that are a minimum 13-inch diameter are also appropriate and can be protected to protect from chewing. Degus need to run a lot, and if you cannot provide them with this ability with a large cage or running room, they should be provided with a Running Wheel, and/or Running Disks and/or Saucers. Running Wheels should be made of metal so the degus cannot chew them and should be without spaces to avoid degus' catching and potentially breaking their toes, feet, and tail. They should also be large enough to avoid damage to the degus' backs. Currently a 13 inch diameter is being promoted, however, it may be that a larger diameter is required. If you cannot buy these, you can build one or two 13-inch or larger diameter running wheels from cake tins and lazy susan bearings (see instructions below on how to create your own running wheels) (this is so there are not slats in their wheels so their toes don't get caught and so they cannot chew the wheels). Wheels smaller than 13-inch diameters or more will damage your degus' backs (smaller running wheels would be like you running on a treadmill while you are looking up at the ceiling). Do not use exercise "balls" because degus get stressed in such a ball (they feel trapped, they need to run around in their pee and poo, and running into obstacles like furniture feels like being in a car accident).



12. Substrate: Your pet will need suitable bedding in their nest box or digging box and on the floor in order to stay warm and cosy during the night and to absorb moisture to keep them dry. You can use a substrate of kiln-dried pine shavings covered by Timothy Hay.

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13. Shelving: create extra jumping and hiding room for your degus by installing shelves. However, CARA requirements should not include shelves that are too short to allow the degu to reach top running speed. You can put in a wooden quarter-shelf (for example) that is attached to the side of the cage with bolts and wide washers (I find there is a lot of vertical extra space in some big cages that can be used); or you can consider buying an extra shelf from the cage manufacturer to put inside the cage as well. If you have a second smaller cage (perhaps for example, the first inappropriate one that the degu came in from the pet store) you may wish to create another shelf by putting this small cage within the new bigger cage. In this case, you should cover the top of that inner cage with wood to avoid bumble foot. You can also place shelves inside your cage to provide somewhere for your Degus to stand. These can be basic pieces of wood (prepared properly and sanded from the safe wood list) screwed to the side of the cage or rested on. In addition, you can use branches for your degus, as these will be natural and provide additional opportunities for your degus to explore and chew. These must be brought from a reputable pet shop to ensure they are Degu safe or picked from the safe wood pages on www.Octodons.ch, www.Degupedia.de, or www.degus-international.org. You could use branches from trees as long as they conform to the details on the safe wood list, including the wood type, being completely natural i.e. contain no pesticides and completely cleaned and baked to kill any wildlife/larvae.



14. Digging Box and/or Nest Box: Degus need a place to sleep in, providing warmth, shelter and shade. You may wish to consider purchasing an aquarium (a 10-gallon aquarium has been used by some owners) and turn it into a digging box filled with a combination of kiln-dried pine shavings (for absorption) and Hay (Timothy Hay or other good quality Hay) (for structure) – one owner placed one of the shelves at the lowest of three potential levels and put the digging box on this shelf – that way the degus keep a full running level below the digging box that is not impeded by the digging box. The digging box allows the degus to burrow as they do in the wild. Often they will also sleep in their digging box.

Alternatively, a wooden nest box can be used. (Even if you provide a digging box, most owners also provide at least one nest box). Ensure it is not varnished in anything, as this will harm your pet. For bedding, small animal bedding from your local stores are fine, including kiln-dried pine wood shavings and hay. The size of the box will depend on how many Degu you intend to keep, although you must remember they grow to around 15cm long plus tail, so imagine the size you would need to accommodate. Typically, a nest box designed for a chinchilla will be the most suitable in most pet stores. If your nest does not have a base, place a shelf underneath so your pet is not sleeping on wire. Some place a cold tile underneath theirs so their pets stayed cool during the summer months.



15. Natural Vegetation within the cage: Natural vegetation in the cage can be used both to enrich the degus quality of life and for natural feed. The degus will investigate the plants, thereby helping to avoid boredom. Also, they can eat the plants (so it is important to avoid plants that are toxic to degus) as they would in their natural habitats, thereby improving their nutrition. For example, you can sprout grass in a jar covered with mesh so they can chew on the grass without impeding new grass growth, or you can put in a terracotta or ceramic pot of sprouted bird seeds. Other plants that you can grow to give to your degu are on the www.Octodons.ch, www.Degupedia.de and www.degus-international.org websites. Also, you can find appropriate plants on hikes as long as you are certain the plants have not been treated with herbicides or pesticides. See these websites for information on appropriate plants.



16. Playpen and/or Running Room: In addition to an adequately sized cage, your degus should be provided with a playpen or degu-proofed room for running at least one hour per day: We built a playpen that is hinged so it can be folded away when not in use. We put the playpen around the cage so the degus can run in and out of the cage as they choose when the playpen is in place; when in place and fully closed it provides up to 43 square feet of additional running room around the cage (more if it is opened with walls being part of the boundaries). Our playpen is made of 8 sections of 2 ft x 4 ft hardboard (obtained from Home Depot) connected with continuous 24-inch hinges (obtained from Canadian Tire or Home Depot). When necessary, the ends of the playpen are joined with additional small hinged sections of 2 ft high hardboard that are clipped together to avoid degus escaping the playpen. For additional safety, long pieces of cardboard can be folded over the edges of the top of the playpen to avoid degus jumping over the tops.

BEHAVIOUR:



17. Degus are competitive and have a sense of fairness, so treat them equally. For example, if you give a treat to one degu, you should also give a treat to all of your other degus. Similarly, if you give one degu attention such as stroking gently under its chin or tummy, you should do the same for all other degus that accept such touching. Degus have a sense of justice and if you treat one favourably, the others likely will become jealous. Also, you will see your degus try to mount each other from behind. This is normal behaviour, even for degus of the same gender. When mounting, they are trying to demonstrate who is dominant. They will also engage in chasing and boxing. Degus need to work out dominance issues themselves, so unless they are rolling and biting each other, you should allow them to resolve these issues. If, however, they are in a death roll or are biting each other, you will need to intervene to prevent serious harm or death. Whatever you do, do NOT place your naked hand in between two fighting degus, or you will undoubtedly be bitten, perhaps seriously. Instead, gently throw a towel over them. Or you may spray them a little with clean room-temperature water. If you need to use your hands to separate them, make sure you are wearing thick gloves. If a degu is injured in such battles, you should take it to the vet to avoid infection of wounds or permanent damage to bodyparts such as limbs or earlobes. If such serious issues arise, you may need to follow the steps of introducing your degus to each other either for the first time or once again.



18. Introductions: Degus need to be introduced to each other carefully. If your degus are not together at the time you purchase or adopt them, you will need to introduce them to each other carefully and gradually. Also, if degus that previously lived together begin to fight seriously, they may need to be re-introduced to each other. Review the section on introductions on the degus-international.org website. There is not a consensus on the proper methodology for introductions. This is easily one of the most debated topics and various experiences point to various results. General steps for introductions may include the following: 1. Put the substrate of one cage into the substrate of the other cage so they get

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used to the smell of each other. 2. Put both cages into a degu-proofed room or playpen and open one cage at a time. This means that one set will be running freely in the room or playpen and will be able to climb on and around the closed cage of the other. Then reverse. 3. Only after this had been done for a few days would I then try to open both cages at the same time in this degu-proofed room or playpen. 4. Once these steps have all been done (after a few days) and only if it seems they are all getting along at each step would I put them into the same cage. However, each situation is different. Degus are like people. Some are able to get along with others and some just don't like each other and never will. You cannot force two degus that absolutely dislike each other to live together peacefully. Use your common sense when introducing degus. Sometimes you can proceed quickly if they seem to be getting along well at each step, and sometimes you need to proceed very slowly and carefully if they do not seem to be getting along well at any step. It is better to be too slow rather than too fast. If you are too fast and put the degus together before they are ready for each other, you may simply delay the introduction process even more, or you may ruin it completely. If two degus absolutely do not get along with each other, each should be paired with a new degu it likes. A degu should not be left alone just because it does not get along with one other degu.



19. Catching an Escaped Degu: Use a tube or other receptacle. Do not chase the degu; let the degu go to the tube or other receptacle. Even if you take all precautions, it is likely that at some time or another your degu will escape from its cage, its playpen, or its running room. If this happens, don't panic. Especially don't chase your degu because it will probably think this is a game and that the objective of the game is for your degu to stay as far away from you as possible!! Instead, you should try to entice your degu into someplace that you can control. For example, degus love to go into tubes. So you can put one of the cardboard tubes you have for enrichment purposes close to the degu slowly, and you can even have some of its treats in the tube. Your degu is likely to eventually go into the tube where it feels safe. At this point, you can simply cover both ends of the tube with your hands (to prevent your degu from falling out and getting injured while you transport it) and then let it out gently in safety (in the cage, the playpen, or the degu-proofed room). You can also try to leave a cap you have worn in a place near to the degu. The cap will smell like you and might therefore attract the degu. If you cannot find your degu, keep quiet and listen for scratching or quiet chirping. Close the toilet in the bathroom after checking it to prevent your degu from drowning. Search each room methodically and then close the door as each room is searched to prevent the degu entering a room you have already checked. If necessary, leave out some food and water for your degu in bowls if it has been more than an hour or so since your degu has escaped – it will probably be hungry and thirsty. Put a tube near the food and water, or maybe an open small transport cage with some bedding and a nest box in case your degu comes back for food and drink and decides it also needs a nap. Above all, have patience and be quiet so you can hear your lost degu. If you have followed the Dinner Bell training mentioned below, you simply need to ring the Dinner Bell for your degu to return.



20. Enrichment: Train your Degus (if their other needs are met) and Create your own Degu Toys
Degus are very intelligent and get bored easily, therefore they need toys to keep them entertained. Degus love to play about, and by using items around the house you can make toys that will keep them occupied and stimulated, often better than shop bought ones. A little creativity can make you some brilliant toys and keep your pets happy. Information on toys that you can create or provide are on <http://www.Octodons.ch>, www.Degupedia.de, or <http://www.degus-international.org>.

a. Tubes: For example, a cardboard tube inside the cage (which can often be obtained for free from carpet stores) is well liked by degus (I have one that is 1 foot long in their cage and a couple of other tubes are put in their playpen).

b. Clicker-Training

You can train your degus to do tricks like jumping through a hoop. This is fun for both you and your degus. Just get a hoop (at least 6 inches in diameter) and a clicker (clickers that are used to train dogs are suitable, but you should get the more quiet ones. They are available in pet stores.). Then you just need to use treats to reward your degus. Things such as oatmeal, lentils (lentilles verte or puy lentils are suitable), puffed wheat or puffed rice (without sugar, salt or other additives) are suitable. It is important, however, to make sure that all of the degus' other needs are met before you try to train them.

c. Treat Balls

- Garden Wire
- Pliers
- Treats

Using regular garden wire (you can normally get a big roll from Wilko's for less than £1) you can twist into whatever shape you want, whether it be a ball, cube or something abstract, hang from part of your cage and fill with dandelion leaves and pumpkin seeds and watch your pets enjoy! Alternatively get a treat holder ball designed for hamsters or other small pets that release treats when rolled around, just be wary of when it starts being nibbled.

d. Ledges

- Kiln Dried Pine
- Drill
- Screws and Wing nuts

Ledges provide places to sit, steps from one platform to another and exercise. Using some kiln dried pine, ensuring it is unvarnished, is not chemically treated and free from any chemicals, drill holes into 2 edges and attach into the sides of your cage for a secure stage for your pets.

e. Egg Carton Treat hunting

- Old egg carton
- bedding
- treats
- wire

Take an old egg carton, place treats into the holes and then fill up with bedding. seal closed by wrapping wire around (we discourage using cello tape due to the glue) and watch your pets tear it open to get to the treats inside!

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f. Cardboard tube hide-a-way

- Toilet roll tubes
- hay
- wire

Using old toilet roll tubes or any cardboard tubing, shape into a circle (3-5 work well) and seal up, filling with hay. hang from bars with wire and watch your pets break in to grab all the hay out, as well as some hiding inside afterwards

g. Digging Tunnels

- a large metal or glass container
- sawdust
- treats

Using a large metal container (I used an old £1 money box in the shape of a cylinder you normally find in pound stores) take off the lid ensuring there are no sharp edges and fill with sawdust and treats, and watch your pet dig around to find the treats. Caution, it will get messy!

h. Burrowing boxes

- An old fish tank or alternative glass container
- soil

Fill an old fish tank with soil, packed in but not too tight and place in the corner of the cage, then watch your pet mimic their natural behaviours and build tunnels inside.

i. Hanging Basket

- A small hanging basket made of wire

Get a small hanging basket, fill with hay to provide some comfort from the bars and your pets will sit inside, swing and use as a look out point

j. Drain pipe hide-a-ways

- unused drain piping
- wire

Use unused drain pipe to give your pets tunnels to hide and play, or hang it from your cage roof to provide shelter from each other.

Websites such as <http://www.Octodons.ch>, <http://www.Degupedia.de> and <http://www.degus-international.org> have many other ideas of toys that you can make yourself inexpensively.

Just make sure that all sharp and dangerous parts are eliminated. Also, watch your degus play with the new toys for awhile to make sure they are not going to be able to hurt themselves.

k. The Dinner Bell

- A distinctive bell

For 30 seconds before serving your degus their meal, ring the bell continuously. Then immediately serve them their meal in their cage. After about two weeks of your doing this consistently, you should notice your degus will immediately run back into their cage for dinner. This has positive implications for retrieving escaped degus. If your degu happens to escape, they will immediately run back into their cage if you ring the bell. However, you need to make sure that you feed them every time you ring the bell, otherwise they will stop this trained behaviour.

Not exercise balls: Some toys that are recommended on some websites and by some pet stores should be avoided. For example, exercise balls are never suitable for degus. A degu feels stressed inside of an exercise ball because it cannot get out. Some authors suggest leaving the exercise ball open so that the degu can exit whenever it wishes, but I would not do this because the degu's tail may get caught between the opening and the floor. This may result in painful degloving (i.e. the degu's tail if caught may fall off). In addition, since degus cannot sweat, they can overheat in the exercise balls and can get heat stroke or die. Also, when a degu in the exercise ball runs into an object, the impact is like a person being in a car accident. Moreover, degus pee and pooh inside of the exercise balls so end up rolling around in their own excrement – not a pleasant experience.

HEALTH AND WELFARE:



21. Room Temperature and Environment: 19 to 24 degrees celcius and quiet area without startling movements, noises or animals. To be absolutely safe, the temperature of the room in which your degus are located should be between about 19 and 24 degrees celcius. I like to ensure their thermometer does not deviate far from 20 degrees celcius. Generally, you can use your common sense: degus can function in the same temperatures that humans prefer: 15-25 °C. However keep in mind that because degus do not sweat, they are more likely than humans to have heat strokes in high temperatures or in direct sunlight. If it is too hot or if they are in direct sunlight for too long, degus can die from heatstroke. This danger should not be taken lightly. There is some debate about what extreme temperatures degus can endure. It depends on several factors. Clearly degus can survive temperatures between approximately 15 °C and 25 °C, but some owners have observed degus surviving much lower (down to 0 °C) and higher (up to approximately 30 °C) temperatures as well. These are risky extremes, however, and should be avoided if possible. If these extremes cannot be avoided, the degus should be observed closely for symptoms of adverse reactions. In hot weather, you can try to cool your degus and their enclosure by placing in the enclosure clean rocks, granite slabs, or ceramic tiles that have been refrigerated; bottles filled with cold water and wrapped in a dry towel; and/or a small glass or ceramic bowl filled with ice cubes. Ensure your degus have a dark place (like a tunnel or nest box) to which they can retreat from direct sunlight. In cold weather you can try to warm your degus and their enclosure by placing in the enclosure bottles filled with warm water and wrapped in a dry towel. Hot or cold air fans should not be directed straight at the degus' enclosure because this creates a draft that may cause respiratory problems. In addition, the degus' enclosure should be in an area without loud noises, sudden movements, or other animals that would startle your degus.



22. Dust Bath: To keep your degus' fur clean, dry and soft. A Degu's fur and skin are intolerant of water. Therefore, Degus need dust baths to help remove the grease and other build up off their fur and skin. Degus love dust baths, which are metal, ceramic or glass tubs filled with a 4cm layer of specialised dust bath dust (also known as chinchilla dust, chinchilla sand and chinchilla clay, but never use normal sand or dust as this would be extremely harmful to your pet) left inside the cage for 30 minutes a day. If it is left longer you may

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need to change the dust more frequently as it is likely they will use the dust bath as a washroom. Degus will often spin around in the tub and flick the dust about, so prepare for a mess! Instead of the metal baths that are sold by most pet shops, you can use a ceramic salt holder which has a flat base, is around 15 cm tall, round and completely contained apart from a large circular opening at the front, allowing your Degus easy access in and out. A bath container that is made of plastic would need to be supervised when in use as it could be easily chewed by the degu. An alternative would be a metal bath that is designed for chinchillas. An inexpensive very suitable alternative that some owners prefer is a small (about 8-inch diameter) glass fish bowl or candy bowl. The bigger the dust bath, the more comfortable it will be for the degu to bathe.



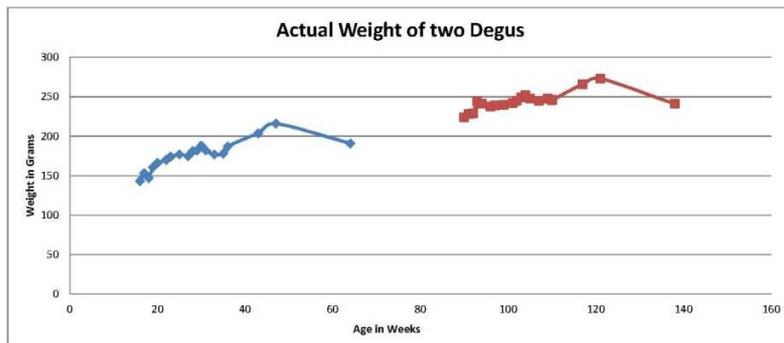
23. **FRAGILE** Do not pull or pick up a degu by its tail, otherwise the tail will break off and will not regrow. This is called "degloving". It will be painful for your degu at the time the tail comes off and your degu will bite at the remaining raw bone. It will eventually heal and the degu will need to get used to balancing itself with a shorter tail. Your degu will survive, but it will not be a pleasant experience, so please avoid pulling and please protect your degu's tail.



24. Weigh your degus regularly and record important data: We recommend that you keep a log of important data about your degus. This includes beginning weight, diet, changes in groups, symptoms, treatments, and so on. If your degu starts to have problems, such information may be helpful for a vet to refine any diagnosis. At the beginning you may wish to weigh your degus either daily or weekly to get used to their normal weight. Although continuing to weigh your degus regularly is not an absolute necessity, it is a good way to be alerted to internal problems that may not be manifest in any visible symptoms. For example, if your degu starts to have teeth problems, you may not have any other early indication other than a decline in weight. It is important, however, not to become overly concerned about small changes in weight, as changes of 10% or so are generally normal. In addition, some owners simply find weighing and recording the weight of their degus fun and just another way to interact with their degus.

The weight of healthy adults ranges between about 170g and 300g, but depending on their build, degus at the lower end can already be underweight, and those at the upper end overweight.

Rather than the actual weight, a better indicator for the health of your degus is the absence of larger changes. Weighing them once a week helps you spot any significant weight changes early.



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When you begin weighing them and they are rather shy, you can entice them into a tube or a closed or open basket or bowl and, covering the exits with your hand, put this onto the balance.



With a bit of training and a few treats, you can also get them to step directly onto the balance, in their enclosure, cage or play area.



Thanks to Pamela for being such a cooperative and patient model!



25. Find a Veterinarian Now: Be prepared for an emergency before it happens. Before you have an emergency, find the vet closest to you who has had experience with degus. Degus have specific requirements and not all vets are familiar with these. In addition, some vets just would prefer not to handle exotic pets such as degus. So first, the vet should be interested in treating degus and to learn at least something about them. Second, it is important that you take time to come in contact with the vet and that you understand your vet and that you can work together with the vet. Phone around to the vets in your area to find out which ones, if any, have had experience with degus and which ones would like to help you with your degus if it ever becomes necessary. In fact, some veterinary clinics welcome you to come in with your degus to introduce them to the vet to help expedite the process if ever an emergency arises. If the vets in your area have not had experience with degus, ask if they would be willing to do some research to learn more about degus, or if these vets can refer you to any other vets in the area with experience with degus. In fact, if there are no vets with degu experience or interest in or near your area, it may not be prudent for you to keep degus at all.

If you take your degus to the vet, they should be taken in a small transport container in groups of at least two. The stress of a degu is likely to be decreased if it has one or more degu companions when taken to the vet. The transport container should be big enough to allow the degus to move around inside, should be constructed of a degu-proof material, should contain a towel under which the degus can hide, should have some hay and an attached water bottle, and should be covered with a towel to protect the degus from drafts.

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26. Cleaning your degus' cage: Green soap for a wood cage and pet-safe cleaner or diluted vinegar for a metal cage; then rinse thoroughly and dry. First remove and clean toys, ladders and other items. Then scoop, sweep, and/or vacuum out the substrate and hay.

Then for a metal cage, use a pet-safe cleaner or diluted vinegar rinsed thoroughly and then dried completely. Your metal cage, base, and any metal, glass, or ceramic surface should be cleaned and disinfected with a pet-safe cleaner at least once a week. Diluted vinegar that is thoroughly rinsed is suitable.

For wooden cages, some owners use green soap, a natural soap suitable to clean wounds or wooden floors, to wash the cage. A properly built wooden cage likely will not need to be cleaned as often as a metal cage. For example, some owners that have properly built wooden cages find that cleaning the cage once every one or two months is satisfactory.

Areas where your Degu excrements and urinates should be spot cleaned regularly to prevent smells and bacteria.

Any broken or badly worn items which make them unsafe should be removed immediately and suitable replacements found.

If your degu becomes allergic to or irritated by any disinfectant or cleaner, stop using it.



27. Build your Own Metal Degu Exercise Wheel and/or Flying Saucer

Metal Degu Exercise Wheel: Degus need exercise wheels, running disks or running saucers in order to run, stay healthy and keep occupied. The best running wheel will be solid, for a more comfy running base and no chance of limbs being trapped and broken, and will be wide (at least 13 inches or more in diameter) to stop unnecessary stress on the back. They should be large enough to avoid damage to the degus' backs. Currently a 13 inch diameter is being promoted, however, it may be that a larger diameter is required. At the moment the only options on the market are plastic ones which are easily prone to destruction, metal ones with spaces that risk catching and breaking the degus' toes and/or tails, and custom built metal ones outside the price range of the average Degu owner. In the following guide we will show you how to make one for around \$15 and a bit of do-it-yourself know how.

What you will need:

- An old/new round tin or cake pan of minimum 13" diameter or more (to prevent damage to degus' backs) and ideally 5" depth (to allow more than one degu to run on the wheel at a time). If the depth is less than 5" you may need more than one exercise wheel so the degu won't fight over who can be on one wheel at once.
- A 'Lazy Susan' bearing (a few \$'s online (for example at Lee Valley, <http://www.leevalley.com/en/home/Search.aspx?action=n>)). Get smallest lazy susan bearing possible, i.e. 3-inch, not the 6-inch, lazy susan bearing to allow the wheel to run easily with the relatively light weight of a degu.

- A marker pen
- A 13" or more ruler
- A drill
- 4 nuts and bolts
- 4 bolts and wing nuts

a. Ensuring your tin is clean, turn it over and find the centre. Some tins normally have a mark or raised bit where the centre is, if your doesn't, use the pen and ruler to draw at least 2 lines from one end to the other to indicate the centre point. To draw the lines, find the longest distance (i.e. the true diameter). Use as many lines as you need, as it is vital the centre is used in order to provide a correctly turning wheel.

b. Using 2 lines as a guide, place the bottom plate of the bearing in the centre of the tin, and mark where the 4 holes in the bearing are for drilling. The best way is to place the bearing at the centre of the tin and to mark on the tin where the bearing holes are.

c. Using a drill, drill a hole the same width as the turntable holes, to ensure a tight fit. On some tins we have used, the metal has been thin enough to puncture with a compass, but this is strongly unadvised.

d. Attach your bearing to the tin, ensuring a tight fit without stopping the turntables from moving. Use the least obtrusive part on the inside of the wheel to help protect your pet from harm.

e. Attach the other turntable plate to the inside of your cage, using whatever method you see fit, we use wing nuts for a secure placement with easy moving.

f. Watch your Degus enjoy their new wheel!

This guide to making a metal Degu wheel has been featured on a few websites and is based on the personal experience of a degu owner in 2012. It is provided here to give you an option for your degus when a custom made/ expensive one is not an option. We can find no evidence of its original design and no legal registration. Degu owners have been using a similar design since before 2010 and we provide this example as its perceived original purpose, to help those in need of it.

Some owners may find that this type of exercise wheel is noisy because of the lazy susan bearing balls that facilitate turning of the bearing. Therefore, an alternative method to make a quiet degu's exercise wheel (the same requirements of a minimum 13" diameter applies to prevent damage to the degus' backs) can be found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5e2l-oxQwE>

Flying Saucer: Another popular toy for degus is the flying saucer. Instructions on how to make one yourself can be found at:

<http://gator549.hostgator.com/~raven999/forums/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=86&p=4831&hilit=flying+saucer&sid=bdaaa39dadda61f172e2e6e92d567671#p4831>