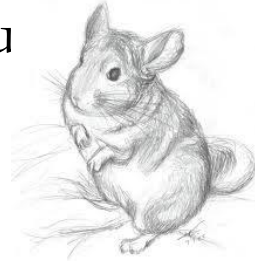


Basic Care of Chinchillas and Degus

The Chinchilla and Degu

The chinchilla (*Chinchilla laniger*) is a rodent originally from the Andes mountain ranges of Northern Chile. In the wild, chinchillas live at high altitudes in rocky, barren mountainous regions. They live in large groups hidden in burrows and crevices. They were originally domesticated in 1923 for the fur industry but have now become a popular pet.

The degu (*Octodon degus*) is a rodent native the western foothills of the Andes mountains in northern and central Chile. Other names for the degu include brush-tailed or trumpet-tailed rat and the Chilean squirrel. In the wild, Degus live in large family groups and dig elaborate burrow systems. Degus came into the domestic market in the last 50 years or so for use in laboratories for diabetes



research.

Both are delightful pets, but are not suitable for all households. They are very social and interactive, but can be messy and destructive. They are agile, active creatures and they require significant exercise. Chinchillas can jump as high as 6 feet. Being a prey species, they can be skittish and easily frightened so are not good pets for young children.

Chinchillas are primarily crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk) and nocturnal, but can also be active during the day. They are naturally a “herd” animal

and do better in pairs or small groups. However, females can be aggressive towards the males. When stressed or overcrowded, chinchillas may chew the hair of other chinchillas (barbering).

Degus, on the other hand, are diurnal (active during the day). They are very social and also do better when housed with other degus.

The average life span of a chinchilla is 10-12 years. Females are larger than males. The average life span of a degu is 5-8 years. Both will eat their own feces. This is a natural behavior essential to good health because it provides extra vitamins and nutrients. (See Health Care of Chinchillas and Degus)



Veterinary Care

In order to maintain the health of your pet, it is important to determine the presence of any problems. Since they are adept at masking the signs of illness, regular examinations are a valuable addition to preventative care. An examination by a veterinarian is crucial to keeping your chinchilla or degu healthy. Problems detected early can

often be treated more easily and effectively.

New pets should be examined soon after they enter the home. At this time, the veterinarian can establish the current health status of the animal and give recommendations for husbandry. After this initial examination, annual

examinations should be maintained until the age of 4 years old for degus and 6 years old for Chinchillas. At this age, they are considered senior. Senior patients should have a thorough physical exam every 6 months.

Routine veterinary care may help identify potential underlying health problems early and treat them successfully.

Housing

Chinchillas and degus are active and require a large (at least 4 square feet), multi-level cage. The larger the number of pets, the more space they will require. Enclosures made of wood should not be used due to difficulty in cleaning and susceptibility to destructive gnawing. The cage can be metal or plastic. However, many plastics are also easily destroyed by gnawing. In addition, the cage should be free of sharp edges and other potential hazards.

Cage flooring for degus should be solid, while chinchillas can be either wire or solid. Solid flooring is recommended over wire flooring. Wire mesh flooring provides a cleaner environment and easier maintenance, but may result in injuries to the feet and hocks. Housing on wire over long periods of time can result in footpad and hock infections from abrasive rubbing on fecal soiled wire. Broken legs are common in chinchillas that fall through the wire mesh. To

prevent foot and limb injury the wire mesh should be small (15mmx15mm), and part of the cage floor should be solid.

Bedding materials must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust free and easy to replace. Acceptable beddings are recycled paper litter, pine wood shavings, and shredded paper. Since degus are burrowing animals, bedding should be deep and absorbent. Cedar shavings should NEVER be used since they have been associated with causing respiratory and liver disease. Sawdust should also be avoided. Remove soiled bedding and stale food daily. Replace all bedding with fresh, clean bedding at least weekly. Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized at least weekly. Bleach diluted 1:32 makes an excellent disinfectant if used *after* cleaning and rinsed off well.

Chinchillas and degus need a spot to hide and feel safe for sleeping and resting. A hide box

can be a cardboard box, plastic igloo, or a hay tunnel/bungalow. An exercise wheel is important and should be provided since both species are very active. Finally, as playful and intelligent creatures, they need items for environmental enrichment including branches and tunnels. Provide something to chew on such as small branches or twigs, untreated wood, or cardboard.

Chinchillas are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement and other such stresses. Chinchillas and Degus need to be kept in a cool, dry environment with adequate ventilation. Temperatures should be kept between 60-75 degrees and less than 50% humidity. Finally, be sure other family pets, such as dogs and cats, are not a threat.

Grooming and Coat Care

The beautiful coat of the chinchilla is the original purpose for the domestication of the chinchilla.

Unfortunately, this coat is relatively delicate and easily loses its attractive appearance. In their native environment, chinchillas and degus keep themselves clean by rolling in volcanic ash. In high humidity, the coat will start to matt and look poorly groomed.

The maintenance of the coat requires regular (2-3 times weekly) dust baths. "Chinchilla dust" (finely powdered volcanic ash) can be purchased at most pet stores. The dust is placed in a container of sufficient size to allow the chinchilla or degu to roll over in it. Do not leave it in the cage and keep it clean and free from waste.



Handling

Chinchillas and degus are not very difficult to handle. However, they are active and move very quickly. Hold the chinchillas gently under and around the thorax/chest with one hand and cradle the rump with the other hand. Be careful when handling them. If handled roughly "fur slip" may occur. This is a defensive mechanism that allows the chinchilla to escape from predators. The hair generally grows back without difficulty, but it may take several months.

Degus can be scooped with both hands and held in a

similar fashion. Never pick up or hold a degu by the tail. Degloving (sluffing of the skin) injuries to the tail are common. The only treatment is surgical amputation of the tail as the skin does not grow back.

Although they rarely bite, they are still capable if agitated enough. However, chinchillas are more likely to urinate when annoyed and do not prefer to be held for long periods of time. It is recommended to handle your degu or chinchilla on a regular basis to help tame them and get used to handling.



"Careful handling is required to reduce the risk of "fur slip" and degloving injury"



Breeding Chinchillas

Chinchillas are seasonally polyestrous which means they can breed multiple times during the breeding season. Their breeding season is late winter/early spring. However, they can still breed the rest of year. The estrus cycle is about 28 days and the heat period is 2 days. Sexual maturity in the male can be as early as 3-4 months old. The female is sexually mature at around 4 months old, but breeding is not recommended until she is about 7-8 months old. Gestation is 110-114 days with litter sizes ranging from 1-4 kits (babies). Parturition (birth) usually occurs in the morning hours with up to 45 minutes between babies. Weaning occurs at 6-8

weeks old.

Many chinchillas will go through mood swings during their pregnancy. Some become more affectionate, while others can get more aggressive. Babies are born with fur, teeth, and open ears and eyes. It is recommended to discontinue dust baths until 10 days after birth for both mom and babies.

Females also have a postpartum estrus which means that the male can impregnate the female soon after birth. The male should be removed to prevent mating with the female and injury to the young. If the female becomes pregnant while still nursing young, the risk for complications

increases.

Since males and females will breed even if they are related, it is important to separate the males and females when the babies are around 2 months old.



Litter sizes range from 1-4 kits...born with fur, teeth, and open eyes and ears...

Breeding Degus

While degus can breed anytime throughout the year, their breeding season in the wild tends to be late spring early summer, when the days are longer. This corresponds when food will be plentiful to support pregnancy and the young. Degus can have multiple litters, however, it is recommended to limit them to one litter per year to prevent the risks of complications.

Degus are sexually mature around 3-4 months old. It is recommended to wait until the female is at least 220 grams before mating to ensure she is able to support the pregnancy and care for the young. Degus have

spontaneous and regularly occurring estrous cycles that average about 21 days in length. Gestation is 87-93 days with litter sizes ranging from 1-10 pups. Parturition (birth) usually occurs overnight with up to 45 minutes between babies. Weaning occurs at 6 weeks old.

Female degus also have a postpartum estrus which means that the male can impregnate the female soon after birth. The male should be removed after parturition to prevent mating with the female. If the female becomes pregnant while still nursing young, the risk for complications increases. However, the male can be

returned to the family after about 7 days as the male does help care for the young. Take care to make sure fighting does not occur when reintroducing the male.

Babies are born with fur, teeth, and open ears and eyes. They start eating solid food at around 7 days old. Since males and females will breed even if they are related, it is important to separate the males and females when the babies are around 2 months old. It is recommended to discontinue dust baths until 10 days after birth for both mom and babies.

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Litter sizes range from 1-10 pups...homes need to found for them



Inbreeding will occur if males and females are not separated at 2 months old...

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All Creatures Animal Hospital is dedicated to providing progressive medicine in a caring environment for pets of all species. Through preventative medicine, client education, professional development of our staff, and advanced medical and surgical techniques, we hope to foster a strong and lasting bond with clients and their pets.