

Food for Thought: **How appropriate is our degus' diet?**

Article by Chloe Long

We all know how important it is to provide our degu with a diet that's right for them- in fact; it is more critical for degus than it is for other pet rodents. From reading Degutopia's diet section, you should be aware that the current most suitable diet for degus (in the UK) is guinea pig feed. But exactly how suitable is this for degus?

Guinea pig food has of course been developed with the health of the guinea pig in mind. Guinea pigs are very popular pets and have been owned, studied and bred in captivity for far longer than the degu. Bearing this in mind, the guinea pig food on the shelves today is ideal for guinea pig nutrition- but is by no means perfect for degus. So, why do the vast majority of degu owners feed their pets on a food not designed for them? The answer: there is simply no alternative. Guinea pig food has been found (out of all readily available diets) to be the most suitable for the degu. A large part of this decision is based upon the fact that guinea pig food contains added vitamin C; guinea pigs cannot produce their own vitamin C (much like humans) and so rely on obtaining it from their diet. The current line of thought is that degus, being related to both guinea pigs and chinchillas, also cannot produce their own vitamin C and therefore also require a dietary supplement. This, however, is based purely on speculation and has not yet been scientifically proven. In fact, recently news has come over from Germany that degus may not be able to produce their own vitamin C, but may not actually require it at all. Degutopia is still waiting on research papers in this area to be sent over to the UK.

However, it is not only vitamin C content that brings the guinea pig diet of the degu into question. Studies have shown that wild degus rely on continuous consumption of very low nutritive quality food. This consists mostly of dried plant material, very similar to hay. Degus are adapted to cope with this digestively by having a specialised population of intestinal microflora. These bacteria help break down otherwise indigestible material (such as cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin),

allowing the degu to absorb nutrients from this food. Wild degus can therefore survive, and indeed thrive, on very poor quality dietary forage. Actually, degus are so well adapted to this diet that if a feed manufacturer produced a degu diet specifically with the *degu's* digestion in mind, it would contain a large proportion of dried plant material and relatively few free nutrients.

How does this 'ideal diet' compare to guinea pig feed? It doesn't. Guinea pigs have different dietary needs to degus and the food they eat is higher in nutrients such as carbohydrates than the food degus need. In fact, guinea pig food is a very rich diet for a degu. So what can we do about this problem? Until a feed manufacturer is prepared to develop a degu food, there isn't much to be done. The best we as degu owners can do is to simulate a more appropriate, natural diet for our pets. Degutopia recommends giving degus only a very small amount of guinea pig food each day- this amount should be no more than enough to cover the bottom of a small food bowl (per degu). In addition, a constant supply of fresh hay should be given- as much as your degu can eat- as this is ideal in terms of replicating natural diet. This should of course be accompanied by the usual- fresh vegetables once per week, fresh water daily, etc- and your degu's digestive system will feel right at home. Indeed, hay is so important to a degu's digestive system that without it, gut bacteria will die and intestinal function will fall, decreasing the overall efficiency of the degu's digestion. Lack of hay can even cause digestive complaints such as constipation, diarrhoea and intestinal fatigue.

Why haven't feed companies yet created a degu diet? The answer is simply that, in their view, the market is not yet big enough in the UK. There are versions of degu diets out there, but these have either been produced by small companies with little dietary research, or large foreign companies who charge a small fortune to export their food to the UK. The leading degu feed developer is currently located in Germany and does not yet export. Degutopia is looking into the possibility of a 'trial

run' of their product here in the UK, so perhaps the future is beginning to look brighter for our degus' health.