

How Your Degu Measures Up: **The weighting game**

Article by Chloe Long

Regularly weighing your degu is as important as it is useful. Often, the first sign that there may be a problem with your degu's health is appetite and/or weight loss. But how should you go about weighing? The first time you get out the scales, try to avoid comparing the reading you get with the 'average degu weight'- in reality, there is no such thing. The weight of a degu is highly individual, varying widely between degus as it does in humans. Your degu's weight will depend on a number of variables, such as the sex of your degu, their age, the time of year, living conditions, diet, musculature, exercise/activity levels, breeding status, health/illness status, etc- the list is almost endless! So, comparing one degu's weight to another's is not really useful to you or your degu- it is far better to compare your degu's weight to itself.

So how often do you need to weigh your degu? Once a month weigh-ins are ideal. If you do it right, it only takes a minute to weigh, take a reading and note it down.

How does comparing your degu's weight work? Your degu's weight will fluctuate around a mean (average) weight every month. It will take a couple of readings before the mean weight can be determined, but once established you can compare the weight reading each month with that mean. If there is a big difference between the mean weight and the reading taken, it could be a sign that there may be something wrong. Remember to take into account any recent changes over the last month that may have affected your degu's weight, for example change in diet or addition of a new exercise wheel to the cage.

For a really useful comparison, monthly weight readings could be entered into Excel and used to plot a line graph similar to the one shown below in figure 1. You can download a blank Excel sheet to do this for you from the 'Degutopia-downloads' menu, simply fill in the weights.

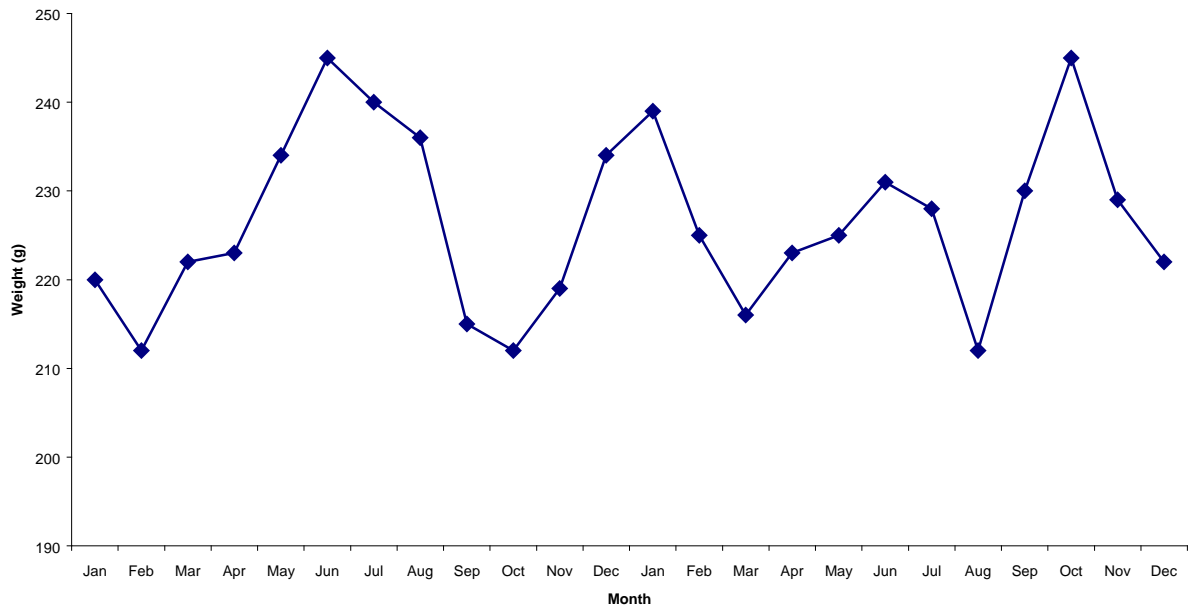


Figure 1- Example weight graph for one degu over two years. Note how the weight fluctuates monthly around a mean weight (227g).

But now for the tricky part- how do you go about the process of weighing? The most important bit of kit you will need is the scales. Generally speaking, electronic kitchen scales are the best for the job as they give you an instant, accurate reading- minimum fuss for you and your degu. Rather than having a bowl as the weighing surface, try and get hold of a flat-topped one (or zero the scales without the measuring bowl), this makes it much easier on your degu. You may now be wondering how to entice your degu into sitting still on the scales while you weigh them; this is actually a lot easier than you might expect. Simply sprinkle something edible like a few natural oats onto the scale surface and let your degu walk on. Degu will sit there happily hoovering up the oats for as long as is necessary for you to take a reading. Just make sure that the scales are zeroed before degu gets on so that you take an accurate reading. Speaking of accuracy, scales that weigh to within 10g are perfectly adequate, however if you're weighing baby degus (pups and juveniles) you should use scales accurate to 1g.

As far as regular weighing is concerned, once per month readings are fine. However, in special circumstances, you might need to weigh more frequently. If your degu is/might be pregnant, you should weigh her once every two weeks, until she stops lactating (around 6 weeks post partum). If your degu has lost weight or put on a lot recently and there may be a health concern, weighing should be done weekly until they're back up/down to their usual weight. If your degu is very ill or on medication, you should weigh them daily until their health returns or medication course ends. Newborn pups should also be weighed daily until they are two weeks old, then weekly until weaned (weighing them in the presence of their mother is important). The other thing to remember is that with monthly weigh-ins, you should aim to weigh at roughly the same date each month (for example the first day of the month) to avoid anomalies in readings. This is particularly important when you are weighing more frequently, so that if weighing daily you should be aiming to do so at the same *time* each day to get the most accurate readings.

If you follow this simple advice, you will be well on your 'weigh' to keeping on top of your degu's health!

--Happy weighing!