



Milwood Animal Clinic

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Sugar Gliders

Natural History

Sugar gliders originate from Australia, Indonesia, and New Guinea. They are small omnivorous, tree-dwelling marsupial mammal. They possess a flap of skin on either side of their body running from the wrist to the ankle that allows them to glide long distances, much like the flying squirrel of North America. The vast majority of sugar gliders in the pet trade are now captive bred. With proper care and nutrition, sugar gliders can live up to 12-15 years in captivity.



Socialization and behavior

Sugar gliders should be socialized between 8-12 weeks out of the pouch. Bonding and socializing older sugar gliders, especially males, can be very difficult. Sugar gliders live in colonies in the wild and are very social. They have a need for both social interaction and mental stimulation. When possible, sugar gliders tend to do better with a cage mate. However, be sure not to house two unneutered sugar gliders of different sexes. Single gliders do not do well, and develop anxiety and aggression. They also run the risk of self-mutilation and over-grooming.

Males should be neutered whenever possible to avoid anti-social behavior and self-mutilation. Even though Sugar gliders are nocturnal by nature, they can adjust to any schedule that would allow them maximum interaction and playtime with their owner. Playtime outside of their enclosure should be provided, but only with careful supervision, especially if there are any other pets in the home.

If properly trained, sugar gliders can behave similar to dogs, i.e., expressing affection, recognizing their name, and coming on command. Common vocalizations include “crabbing” (when frightened), barking (lonely or playing), purring/chirping (contentment), and sneezing/hissing (grooming or playing). When threatened, a sugar glider will stand on its back legs and charge at the threat, feigning strikes and making loud sounds similar to a locust.

Diet

In the wild, a sugar glider’s diet consists of pollens, arthropods, plants and insects. However, their diets can vary greatly by season, location, and climate conditions. Their diet in captivity shouldn’t have a wide selection of high-sugar, high-fat items as they will almost always eat these foods and not their more healthy options. An inappropriate diet can lead to illness and shortened life span. A diet high with insects should be avoided as insects are very yummy and sugar gliders may start to ‘hold out’ for them as opposed to eating their more nutritious foods.

There are several recipes for sugar glider diets. We recommend visiting www.sugarglider.info for recipes on nutritious diets. Beginner glider owners usually find the Original High Protein Wambaroo Diet (OHPW) is the easiest to make. The Pet Glider Exotic Diet (TPG) and the Bourbon's Modified Leadbeaters Diet (BML) are also excellent recipes to feed. It is important to stick to the recipe exactly to make sure your pet is receive enough nutrition. This includes using appropriate vitamins.

Nutrition is constantly being researched and recommendations are always changing. Thus, it is wise to frequently research the generally accepted sugar glider diet.

Treats should be no more than 5% of their daily diet, or 1 per day. Good treats include: small portions of fruit (melons, peaches, mangos, blueberries, and papaya), dried fruit, non-flavored yogurt drops (the kind for rabbits), and low sugar applesauce. Changing a diet routine once a healthy one is established isn't recommended as this can cause undue stress. Water should be available at all times, and changed daily to ensure cleanliness. Using both a water bottle and a secondary water dish is recommended.

Foods that are toxic or otherwise detrimental to sugar gliders include:

Chocolate

Dairy Products

Fruits that are difficult to clean (raspberries, blackberries, cauliflower)

Fruits high in oxalates (strawberries, carrots, spinach, pears, lettuce, figs, collard greens, and beets)

Corn

Grapes and Raisins

Bird, Dog, or Cat food

Nuts and Seeds



Enclosure

The recommended enclosure size for 2 adult sugar gliders is approximately 36 inches wide by 24 inches high. PVC-coated wire is preferred over epoxy, paint, powder-coated, or galvanized wire because of potential health and safety hazards. Keep in mind while buying your enclosure, that there are enough horizontal bars so that they can't slide down and cause soft-tissue damage to their paws. Also be sure that the spaces between the bars are small enough to avoid escape or getting their heads caught (less than 0.5in is recommended for this reason). A removable waste tray should be at least 1" from the floor of the cage for sanitary reasons. Paper for a substrate is preferred over a pine, cedar, clumping or corn-cob litter as these are abrasive and can harbor bacteria, causing infection. Substrate is not needed if the litter tray is kept cleaned.

Daily changing of litter is recommended, as well as quarterly sterilization with diluted bleach water.

Also consider the placement of the cage itself in your home. Environmental temperature, noise, odor, and lighting should be taken into account. The kitchen, entryway and window ledges probably aren't the best places. Ideal temperature is 75-80 degrees Fahrenheit, and nighttime temperature shouldn't drop below 70 degrees Fahrenheit. If the temperature is cool, using a

supplement heater or night bulb that can produce heat is recommended (not inside the cage itself). A heat rock is NEVER recommended. They can and will chew wires if given the chance.

Enrichment/playtime

Any toy or item with loose strings or wires should be avoided as they can become entangled. They can also encircle toes and tails and strangulate the tissue.

Wheels are highly recommended due to the animals active nature. While a solid bottom wheel can be used, it will become incredibly dirty quickly. A grated wheel (soft plastic not wire) can be used. NEVER use a wheel with a cross bar or an enclosed wheel with a center bar as this can kill a sugar glider. There are safe sugar glider wheels available online such as Stealth, Raptor, or Fast Track wheels.



Plants and branches are recommended to encourage climbing, but plastic and artificial plants are preferred due to health and sanitary considerations. Varied sizes of branches of nontoxic trees can be used as well.

Fleece sewed appropriately (hidden seams) can be used as well to stimulate climbing and create safe areas for sleeping. Sugar glider toys can also be found in different locations, though toys with metal should be avoided (as it can pinch toes) or loose strings (as previously stated).

Grooming

Bathing is not required. Sugar gliders are self-groomers and will also groom each other if housed with others. The nails can be filed with an emery board. Close clipping of the nails may reduce their ability to firmly grasp its surroundings, causing them to fall.

Handling

Restraining a sugar glider, for nail filing or medicating, is best done with a small fleece pouch (like a mitten or glove). They should never be picked up by the tail or scruff (the loose skin in-between the shoulder blades). They can be transported in a zippered, fleece pouch or zippered carrier. But use caution! Sugar gliders do have thumbs and can manipulate a zipper from the inside to escape.

Consistent handling will help bond a sugar glider to you. Many of them enjoy handling and play time once they are acclimated to the scent of their owner. Each sugar glider, however, has a unique personality, and there are some that will prefer to roam and run around over pets.

Veterinary Care

Physical exams are recommended for sugar gliders once a year. Stool samples are tested for any sign of intestinal parasites. Your doctor and nurse will advise you on what types of testing and procedures should be done, i.e. blood panels, x-rays, neutering, and dental cleanings. Males should be neutered before 4 months of age. Females cannot be safely spayed, and should not be attempted unless for a dire medical emergency.

Sugar gliders are very prone to hiding their illnesses as well, so the moment something is seen to be "off", they should be seen. Sugar gliders are prone to dehydration rapidly and can quickly die from that alone (even if that is not the primary issue).

Common Disorders

Malnutrition- One of the most common, and yet most preventable disorders faced by a sugar glider. Signs of malnutrition may be hind-limb paralysis, blindness, dehydration, cataracts, metabolic bone disease, and/or seizures. They are very prone to calcium deficiency - hence the importance of picking a staple diet.

Obesity- Also very common, and easily preventable. Obesity can lead to other health complications such as diabetes, hindering climbing ability, and heart/breathing problems.

Intestinal Parasites- These can cause weight loss and malnutrition; a fecal test can catch them before they become a problem. Many parasites can cause weight loss and malnutrition, and some can even be passed to humans.

Hair loss- Normally from poor nutrition, psychological (anxiety), or vitamin deficiency

Pneumonia- Caused by a drop in body temperature, signs may include shivering, lethargy, and discharge from the eyes/nose.

Diarrhea- Can be caused by an abrupt change in diet, inappropriate diet with too high sugar content, bacterial overgrowths, or intestinal parasites.

Stress-related diseases- Including self-mutilation (more common in single-sugar glider enclosures), cannibalism of young, and eating disorders.

Endocrine disorders- Such as thyroid disorders, i.e. hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism.

Trauma- Fractures, burns, fight injuries.

Dental disease- This is also an easily preventable condition by feeding a proper diet. Dental disease can lead to gingivitis, tooth loss, and infections that can spread throughout the body.

Neoplasia/Cancers- Masses or tumors that may be malignant or benign.

Did you know?

- Sugar gliders exhibit exceptional control over the gliding membrane (patagium), allowing them to glide up to 50 meters.
- Males have two scent glands; one on the forehead, which looks like a bald spot, and the other on the chest. Neutering can cause these to become less prominent.
- The long tail is mainly for steering while gliding.
- They have opposable thumbs on all four feet, which is all the better for getting into mischief.
- They have an innate fear of falling, so if they can't easily grasp their surroundings, they'll become significantly less active.
- Adults can reach 5-6 inches in length, with a tail equally long.

