

Caring for Your Sugar Glider

By Mark Burgess, DVM

Sugar gliders are small nocturnal marsupials from Australia, Indonesia and New Guinea; they resemble small striped chipmunks. They have a flap of skin between their front and rear legs that allows them to glide through the air, similar to flying squirrels. Their body length is 5-6 inches, with a 6- to 7-inch tail. Gliders are social in nature and may benefit from being kept in pairs. With good care, some gliders may live beyond 10 years old.



If you're thinking about getting a sugar glider, please adopt from a rescue group rather than buying from a pet store or breeder. There are many wonderful sugar gliders out there just waiting to be adopted. To find a sugar glider rescue, do a search for "sugar glider rescue" on the Internet. Or, check out the gliders in the "small and furry" category on www.petfinder.com.

Housing

Sugar gliders are very active, so they need space; a glider's cage should be at least 18 inches wide and long, and 30 inches tall. Open-air wire cages are best. Cover the cage bottom with an inch of absorbent bedding such as hardwood chips (birch or aspen), or recycled paper bedding (such as Care Fresh). Change the bedding twice a week. Some branches free of splinters should be provided for climbing.

Gliders prefer to hide and sleep inside a small chamber, so you should provide a hanging cloth pouch suspended from the cage, with easy access via a branch. Some gliders prefer a hanging basket with soft cloth bedding inside. Since they come from warm climates, the ideal air temperature for gliders is 60 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Avoid cold, drafty conditions; keep the cage clean and dry. Gliders do not need wood to chew on, since their front teeth are self-wearing.

Feeding

Gliders are omnivorous, and in the wild they eat insects, fruits, nectar, eucalyptus sap, and some invertebrates. In the past, complex homemade diet formulas were created to mimic the natural diet. Fortunately, well-formulated commercial glider food is now available. The safest approach is to feed your glider a good pelleted food, such as Pretty Pets glider diet, and add to this a variety of fruits and vegetables. If a glider diet is unavailable, then a very low-fat cat food such as Hills W/D, or a low-fat hedgehog kibble may be used sparingly (i.e., as 20 percent or less of the total diet). These foods will still provide vitamins, minerals and protein.

Many fruits and veggies that gliders enjoy are low in calcium; use only small amounts of carrots, peas, corn, banana, plums, peaches, and sweet potato. Some higher-calcium veggies and fruits may be fed more liberally, including papaya, blackberries, raspberries, grapes, apples, mango, and some chopped leafy greens. Avoid high-fat foods such

as excessive seed/nut intake, monkey chow, or regular dog and cat foods. Offer a small plate of food once or twice daily; reduce the amount if your glider becomes heavy.

A little yogurt, cottage cheese, fruit baby-food, and an occasional unsalted nut can also be given as a treat. Avoid feeding your glider mealworms and crickets, since these are not nutritionally balanced unless carefully modified with supplements. Earthworms, slugs or silkworms are better choices nutritionally. Gliders on balanced diets need no additional calcium or other supplements.

Fresh water should always be available via a water feeder bottle, although gliders may only drink sparingly. Remember to clean your sugar glider's cage, food bowls and water sources regularly.

Behavior

Like many wildlife species, gliders are very energetic and easily stressed. Young gliders often require extensive handling to become socialized, and you may need to carry the pet in a pouch for several hours a day for the animal to become tame. Gliders may bond with their people, but some continue to exhibit fear with other people. If frightened, a glider will make a hissing/growling noise, and may bite if he feels threatened.

Gliders are fast-moving and may leap from your hands to nearby objects or people. They like heights and may rapidly climb up to a person's head. To minimize stress and escape attempts, a glider should not be carried out in the open in unfamiliar areas, especially outdoors, but rather should be carried in a cloth pouch or inside one's clothing. Their behaviors can make them challenging medical patients; though they physically tolerate surgeries well, they are extremely prone to self-mutilation via chewing any surgical incisions, unless strong preventive measures are taken.

Common Diseases

Sugar gliders have several common disease problems in captivity, some of which are due to dietary deficiencies.

Rear leg paralysis. This condition is fairly common and typically occurs suddenly. Autopsy exam of paralyzed pets has revealed that spinal cord trauma is the usual cause. Gliders are very active and often leap around. If their diet is deficient in calcium or has a calcium/phosphorous imbalance, then the bones become soft, which leads to an easily damaged spinal column.

Treatment of paralysis includes restricting the pet's activity and giving cortisone within 24 hours of the injury, as well as correction of the diet and short-term calcium supplementation. However, severely damaged spinal cords do not heal, and in many cases the paralysis is permanent, so the pet does not survive. You can prevent this disease by feeding your glider a balanced diet that includes a commercial food.

Polioencephalomalacia. This neurologic condition causes certain areas of the brain to degenerate. Signs may include weakness, dizziness, lack of coordination, gradual paralysis, tremors, disorientation and lethargy. The pet usually eats poorly and loses weight. The causes are not completely understood, but some animals appear to improve when given Vitamin B1 (Thiamine), suggesting that nutritional deficiencies may contrib-

ute to this disease. A glider with a severe case may fail to improve and eventually die. Prevention is best accomplished by feeding your glider a balanced diet that includes a good commercial food.

Cataracts. These appear as a pale “spot” in the center of the eye (in the lens) and result in blindness. Cataracts typically occur in very young infant gliders. Infection of the mother’s pouch may lead to eye damage in the infant glider. Another possible cause is nutritional, since infant cataracts seem more common when the mother is on a poor diet, is fed too much sugary food, or is obese. Vitamin A deficiency has been proposed as a possible cause. Finally, there may be an inherited tendency to get cataracts. There is no effective treatment.

Trauma. Gliders are easily injured if they are attacked by other house pets, if they are dropped or stepped on, or if a tail or leg becomes trapped in the cage wire. Torn skin and bone fractures are common. You can prevent injuries by handling your glider carefully, and providing safe, secure housing away from the reach of other pets. An injured glider should be kept warm and placed in a small enclosure, such as a small cage or box, to minimize movement. Seek veterinary care immediately.

Urinary tract diseases. These may include bladder infections, urinary blockages, and kidney disease. These problems may be more common in gliders on very high-protein, high-mineral diets, such as large amounts of regular cat food. Signs may include bloody urine, straining to urinate or dribbling urine, lethargy, decreased appetite, increased thirst or urine output, protruding and/or discolored penis, and weight loss. Seek veterinary care if you notice any of these signs. Treatment depends on the exact type of urinary tract disorder; prevention is via providing proper diet and housing.

Digestive disorders. Gliders may develop diarrhea or rectal prolapse (protruding bowel). Common causes include bacterial infection of the bowel, parasites, or improper diet. A fecal analysis should be done by your veterinarian on a fresh fecal sample. Antibiotics or anti-parasitic drugs may be needed, along with anti-diarrheals such as Kaopectate. Correct the glider’s diet if necessary.

Skin problems. Poor-quality hair coats and/or oily skin may be seen with poor diet or moist, dirty cage conditions. Repeated escape attempts or pacing within a small cage may result in areas of hair loss, due to repeated rubbing of an area of skin. Occasionally, mites may cause small bumps on the edges of the glider’s ears. Mature male gliders develop a normal bald patch on the top of the head between the ears, and another on the front of the chest, where scent glands are located.

Veterinary Care

No vaccines are given, but regular exams are recommended for early disease detection. Have an exam done when you first get your glider, then at one year old, then every 6 to 12 months after that. With good care, your glider can be a happy and lovable pet!

Dr. Mark Burgess is owner of Southwest Animal Hospital/The Exotic Animal Practice in Beaverton, Oregon. Ninety-five percent of his practice is small exotic pets, including ferrets, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, hedgehogs, marsupials, and some wildlife. He lectures at conferences and has published articles on exotic pet disease in medical journals.