Feeding, Diet, and Common Nutritional Problems of Sugar Gliders

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In the wild, sugar gliders are omnivores and eat a vast variety of foods including many types of insects and arachnids (e.g., spiders), and tree gums, nectars, and saps. The diet varies depending upon the season of the year and the availability of food.

Common nutritional problems

Sugar gliders kept as companion animals are prone to two main nutritional problems.

Low calcium levels: A diet too low in calcium can lead to bone and dental disease. Insects in general, are low in calcium, so they should be gut loaded with a high quality diet containing additional calcium. This means that insects, such as crickets, must be fed a special supplement prior to feeding them to the sugar gliders. These calcium-supplemented diets are available commercially. Fruits and vegetables are also low in calcium and higher in phosphorous. These, too, should be given in limited amounts.

Obesity: One of the biggest mistakes is to believe that since they are called sugar gliders, their diet should be high in sugar. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Feeding a diet too high in fat and sugars can lead to obesity and breeding problems. Fly pupae and mealworms are especially high in fat and should only be fed as a small part of the diet. Protein is an essential part of a sugar glider's diet, and high protein foods need to be fed.

Sugar gliders in the wild consume 15-20% of the sugar glider's body weight daily. Pet sugar gliders expend fewer calories than those in the wild since they are not foraging for food. The diet of pet sugar gliders is also more easily digested and absorbed than the diets in the wild. For these reasons, great care must be taken to not overfeed pet sugar gliders and they should be monitored regularly for weight gain.

Feeding methods

Sugar gliders are nocturnal, so it is generally recommended that they be fed at dusk. If they appear hungry during the day, you may split the meal, giving most of it at night, and a small amount in the morning. Since they live in trees, it makes sense that they would prefer eating up high, rather than having the food bowls on the floor of the cage. Mounting the bowls toward the top of the cage will also help keep them more clean.

Variety is the key to proper nutrition. By feeding a variety of foods, nutritional imbalances are less likely to occur. Some owners have reported that their sugar gliders have become finicky, so variety, especially at a young age, will keep them interested in many different foods. When feeding a sugar glider, be sure he does not simply pick out his favorite foods and leave the rest. Finely chopping and mixing the food will help assure he eats a variety.

Many different types of diets have been suggested for sugar gliders. The diet in Table 1 is a compilation of several diets, provides variety, and is nutritionally sound.

Table 1. Sample Diet

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Give ONE selection from each group daily for a total of 3 selections. (See example below.)	
Group 1 1 Tablespoon (Tbsp)	**Commercial small carnivore or insectivore mix:** such as Mazuri Insectivore Diet-5MK8 or Insectivore-Fare by Reliable Protein Products.
Group 2 1 Tbsp	**Prepared commercial nectar mix:** A commercial mix, which is fortified with vitamins and minerals (Nekton-Lori or Avico Gliderade), and mixed with water. **OR** **Leadbeater's Mixture** (see recipe below).
Group 3 1/2 teaspoon	**Fresh vegetables:** Tomatoes, sweet corn, sweet potato, beans, shredded carrot, squash, or pumpkin. **OR** **Greens:** Mixed sprouts, lettuce (not iceberg), broccoli, parsley.
Example	**Day One** 1 Tbsp insectivore mix 1 Tbsp nectar mix ½ teaspoon chopped and mixed tomatoes, beans, & carrots **Day Two** 1 Tbsp insectivore mix 1 Tbsp Leadbeater's Mix ½ teaspoon chopped and mixed broccoli, romaine lettuce, & parsley

Table 2. Recipe for Leadbeater's Mix

Leadbeater's Mix

- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons warm water
- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 shelled hard-boiled egg
- 1 teaspoon vitamin/mineral supplement (e.g.; Herptivite or Glider Booster)
- 1/2 cup high protein baby cereal added gradually

Mix the first four ingredients in a blender, and then add the baby cereal, blending after each addition until smooth. Refrigerate or freeze unused portions. Discard any unused refrigerated portion after 3 days.

Foods to avoid

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- High fat foods (nuts and seeds)
- Foods high in refined sugar
- Foods with artificial sweeteners (aspartame, Nutrasweet)
- Chocolate
- Fried foods
- Fruit pits and apple seeds

Use caution when feeding wild insects since they may have had exposure to pesticides or herbicides.

Acceptable treats

- Blossoms and branches of *Eucalyptus*, *Banksia*, *Grevillea*, *Acacia*, *Melaleuca*, *Callistemum*, or Hakea
- Bee pollen
- Cooked chicken or turkey
- A few gut-loaded insects, such as crickets
- Diced grapes, apples, melons, nectarines, raisins, sultanas, figs

Treats should be limited to 5% of daily intake.

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