

CARING FOR YOUR PET CHINCHILLA

by
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Chinchilla's are small rodents that originated in the high Andes mountains in South America. They have been raised in captivity for their very soft fur. Chinchillas typically live 8-10 years with good care. They are often shy and skittish at first, but typical have friendly and entertaining personalities when in comfortable situations. They are nocturnal and are most active after the sun goes down. While they have some specific and rather unique care requirements, chinchillas are favorite pets due to their natural curiosity, appearance, texture of their fur, and acrobatic nature.

Housing

Cages

Chinchillas are active and acrobatic creatures, and need lots of space in their cage to move around. A cage with a base at least 4 ft by 2 ft is recommended, but cages up to 6 ft by 6 ft good work well to give the chinchilla room to move around. Cages with at least 2-3 levels 5-6 inches above the lower level allow chinchillas space to climb and jump. The bottom of the cage should be solid and the sides should be made of wire mesh with less than 1 cm between the wires. Wire meshes larger than this can allow your chinchilla to catch a foot in the wire, leading to soft tissue damage or a nasty break. This is a common, and rather avoidable, cause of a chinchilla needing a partial hind limb amputation.

Chinchillas are shy animals, and require spaces to hide. At least one nest box about 12 in x 10 in should be provided for each chinchilla in the cage. Four to five inch PVC pipes make excellent tunnels and hiding areas for enrichment as well. These pipes are easily cleaned, dishwasher safe, and can be easily rearrange to give your chinchillas space some variety.

Temperature

Chinchilla are native to the high, cool, dry mountains of South America. Chinchillas do best and are most comfortable at or slightly below room temperature. They do not handle temperatures above 75-80°F well, and should never be kept in areas that may exceed these temperatures. Chinchilla also do not tolerate humidity well, and periods of high humidity can predispose them to heat stroke.

Bedding

Chinchillas are best housed on loose bedding in the bottom of their cage. Many materials are available for the bedding, and many are not appropriate. Shredded paper and recycled paper products are recommended. Aspen shavings are also acceptable, however other wood shavings, such as pine and cedar are not recommended and can be very harmful to your chinchilla. The oils and phenols in these woods can be irritating to the skin on the feet and respiratory tracts and lead to serious disease. Corncob bedding may be consumed by your chinchilla and lead to gastrointestinal problems.

Feeding

Chinchillas typically do best on free fed fresh timothy hay and a small amount of pellets. Alfalfa based pellets are acceptable, but timothy based pellets are preferred. Timothy has a lower concentration of calories and protein, and is preferred to avoid obesity in our captive kept animals. Pellets are much higher in calories than long-stem hay. Hay is also higher in fiber than pellets; fiber is important not only for the chinchilla's digestive health, but for their dental health as well. Chewing the fiber in the hay helps wear down the chinchillas molars, which are constantly growing. Chinchillas can derive all the nutrition they require from free fed quality long stem hay.

Treats are acceptable in small amounts. They should never exceed more than 10% of the animals' total diet. Sun flower seeds, yogurt treats, raisins, and very small pieces of dried fruit are acceptable as treats. Even raisins and similar sized treats can be too large, and should be cut into smaller pieces to prevent bloat and choke.

Water

Fresh, clean water should be made available to your chinchilla at all times. The water should be changed at least every week. The upright "sipper" style bottles that are widely available for rodents work very well for chinchillas as well.

Cage Mates

If you decide one chinchilla a good pet, you may decide to add more to your growing family. Luckily, a few chinchillas can be easily kept in an appropriately sized cage as long as a few principles are kept in mind. First, all chinchillas should be spayed or neutered. This will prevent unwanted breeding, unwanted offspring, and complications from pregnancy. Second, chinchilla females are larger, and typically more aggressive than males. Introducing a male into a female's established area may result in bite trauma to the male. Also, two young males, especially if intact, coming into maturity may fight, even if there is no female present.

Dust Baths

Chinchillas are unique in the requirement for frequent dust baths. The "dust" used is a special blend, typically of a pair of compounds known as silver sand and Fuller's earth. Pre-made blends are now readily available at most pet stores. Occasionally, owners may become allergic to the traditional dust baths. In these cases a homemade dust bath mix can be substituted. If you believe you may be allergic to the dust baths, discuss the allergies with your family doctor and possible solutions with your veterinarian.

Recommend Health Care

New pet exam

Soon after acquiring a new pet, whether it's a new dog, cat, chinchilla, rat, bird, lizard, or tortoise, a visit to the veterinarian is always recommended. Ideally, the visit is within 1-2 weeks of adding a new member to your family. This visit helps familiarize you with appropriate care of your new pet in addition to making sure that there are no health problems evident with your chinchilla. Common points of examination are dental health, activity, listening to the heart and lungs, and evaluation of body condition (is the chinchilla overweight or underweight, etc)

Annual physical exam

Similar to the new pet exam, annual visits allow your veterinarian to follow your chinchillas health through life, answer questions you may have, and possibly detect early signs of disease and therefore treat problems more effectively.

Spay or Neuter

Spayed and neutered animals live longer, healthier, happier lives. Females who have been spayed are no longer at risk for uterine infections, difficult births, and uterine or ovarian cancer, and less likely to develop some undesired behaviors, not to mention avoiding unwanted additions to the family in the form of baby chinchillas. Neutered males are far less likely to develop sexual habits, and therefore far less likely to develop the very painful and potentially dangerous condition called fur ring, or ‘paraphimosis’ (see below).

Dental trims

Dental trims are NOT considered part of routine health care for chinchillas and are necessary when either there is malocclusion of the incisors (big front teeth) or molars (big back teeth).

Common Health Problems

Dental Malocclusion / “Slobbers”

Chinchillas on an improper diet, typically a diet too high in pellets and too low in hay and fiber, will frequently develop overgrown molars. This causes pain and difficulty eating. The front of the body will also frequently be covered from saliva, giving the name “slobbers”. These cases will often need multiple dental trims to correct the problem and may never completely resolve. This is a disease best prevented by feeding an appropriate diet that is high in hay and fiber.

Fur ring

Occasionally, males will show signs of frequently attempting to urinate with little or no urine produced. This is a sign that the male may have developed a fur ring around his penis. This is a constricting injury that prevents the male from retracting his penis or urinating normally. Animals which are frequent groomers or intact males exhibiting sexual behaviors are at an increased risk for developing this disease.

Fur slip

A chinchilla’s hair is soft and luxurious... and fragile. If an animal becomes stressed or is improperly handled, and it can very easily shed a large patch of fur. There is rarely pain or trauma associated with the shed fur, but it may take several weeks for the fur to grow back in.