

Chinchillas



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Date Published: 02/05/2020

- Social and interactive rodent, high energy
- Playful and intelligent
- Should be with other chinchillas of same sex
- Will overeat but needs a carefully balanced diet
- Requires a large amount of space and cool temperatures
- Nocturnal
- Destructive to property
- Generally cannot be housetrained



Photo courtesy of Depositphotos

Chinchillas are playful and intelligent pets, but they are not suited for all households. Although they are social and interactive, they are also messy and destructive. They make a significant mess when allowed out of the cage. Chinchillas are extremely active and need a significant amount of out of cage time and exercise. In an ideal world, they would be kept uncaged, but their penchant for chewing everything within reach and defecating anywhere they wish prevents that in most households. Unfortunately, they are intelligent, social, and active, and therefore not well suited for cage life. Fortunately, they are reasonably hardy animals and if properly fed and cared for, do not develop a large array of serious medical concerns.

Proper husbandry prevents many of the common medical issues. The vast majority of diseases seen by veterinarians in these friendly, appealing pets relate directly to poor husbandry. Although somewhat expensive, the adorable face and soft fur can often lead to impulse purchases, without an owner realizing the extent of the care required to keep them healthy. This, combined with the over-marketing of foods not designed for their intestinal tract can lead to significant health problems over their long life span. Being educated about what these pets need can go a long way towards improving their overall wellbeing.

Chinchillas are native to the Andes Mountains of South America. They dwell primarily at high altitudes, and are currently only found to exist in the wild in Chile. They are named after the Chincha people of the Andes, who once wore their thick fur, but unfortunately, overhunting has driven the wild chinchilla to near extinction. Most chinchillas used today in the fur industry are farm-raised.

In their natural environment, chinchillas live in large groups hidden in burrows and crevices. They are prey for a variety of animals (birds, snakes, and wild omnivores such as canines

and skunks) and therefore have retained the skittish nature of prey species. They are able to jump as high as 6 feet, and will defend themselves by spraying urine or allowing large patches of fur to fall out if bitten ("fur slip"). This can be important when you take your chin to the veterinarian, where chinchillas may feel threatened and release fur; sometimes that is a surprise to a new owner. Their fine bones are also delicate, and fractures may inadvertently occur during restraint. Many veterinarians prefer to examine chinchillas from within the confines of a small hand towel wrapped around the it to keep the delicate animal accessible but free from injury.

Diet

The primary diet in the wild is high in fiber, and includes plant leaves, stems, bark, wild fruits, and small insects. This is a far cry from the most common, yet unbalanced, modern diet of pellets for the pet chinchilla. This natural high-fiber fare promotes health throughout the digestive tract, starting with the continuously growing teeth and ending with the stool, which is commonly eaten and re-processed. Calling a chinchilla "a digestive tract covered in fur" would be a reasonable description, and it is imperative to feed them adequately to maintain health.

Lively and entertaining, these delightful little creatures do make wonderful pets in households with a high tolerance for messes and destruction. They are likely not appropriate for houses with small children or predator-type animals, unless the interactions are closely monitored to prevent injury to the chinchilla.

They are one of the longest-lived domestic rodents, with life expectancies topping 12 years when properly housed.

Husbandry

Caging

Chinchillas are inquisitive, active, and intelligent. They require a startlingly large amount of space, particularly if they are caged for long periods of time. A large 2-story ferret cage (6 ft X 6 ft X 4 ft) would appropriately house one to two chinchillas. The larger the number of pets, the more space they will require.

Although many owners prefer a wire mesh cage to allow droppings to pass through, this can lead to injury should a foot or leg become entrapped in the wire. Plastic bottom cages can also be problematic because chinchillas will commonly chew through them. Additionally, the urine tends to stain plastic, and is difficult to clean. Most chinchillas are not readily trained to a litter box and tend to urinate and defecate where they wish. For many animals, the best solution is a wire cage with the bottom covered with a thick layer of hay. In this manner, it serves a dual purpose of a snack and soft bedding to protect the feet of the animals. The bedding will need to be thick and protective, absorbent as possible, and digestible if eaten. Regardless of bedding chosen, the cage will need regular cleaning either daily or at least every other day.

Enrichment

The cage should be outfitted with plenty of things to keep the intelligent chinchilla mind and large teeth busy. Ledge shelves to perch on, cardboard boxes to hide in and eat, and chewing toys are all important. Since chinchillas are so quick to destroy their chew toys, it is hard financially to keep them supplied from the local pet store. A good choice is safe wood trees that have not been sprayed with pesticides, and branches from apple and other fruit

trees, non-resinous pine, and beech. Although maple is sometimes recommended for chewing, it's not a good idea as chinchillas can develop a severe case of blood in their urine after eating dried maple leaves.

Oxbow makes a series of edible, safe, nutritious toys, including hay mats, tubes, and houses. These tend to be popular and safe, although over time, can prove expensive. Chinchillas do not need salt or mineral blocks if they are being fed a proper balanced diet.

Other inexpensive chew toys include deer antler and bones, which can be purchased inexpensively in bulk from wildlife rehabilitation facilities.

Many of the chew toys in pet stores are treated wood, expensive, and may only have a life expectancy of hours once they enter the chinchilla's cage.

Chinchillas have a high energy level, and equipping the cage with an oversized wheel designed specifically for chinchilla use will provide endless hours of entertainment, exercise, and all-out fun. There are several different varieties available, and some chins do not take to them instinctively but have to be taught how to use them, but once they have caught on, it can be difficult to pry them out of their wheels. Chinchillas are primarily nocturnal, so it is particularly helpful to purchase a quiet wheel in order to maintain the sanity of the people in the house. Although more expensive, it certainly is worth a few extra dollars to prevent a wheel from squeaking at 2 a.m.

Chinchillas are somewhat high strung, and do not do well in congested and busy areas of the house. Additionally, they are largely nocturnal, and their noisy night time play will likely disrupt their sleeping humans.

They are extremely heat sensitive. They should not be housed near a heat source or window. In fact, a chinchilla exposed to over 75°F or in a high humidity environment can experience heat stroke. An underground basement where it stays cool year round is good, and it's out of way of day to day household operations but has easy access for playtime. Many people add strips of slate or quartz into the cages for chinchillas to sit on as a "cool spot" during the warmest part of the year.

Adding warmth, humidity, and stress is a recipe for a chinchilla disaster, and owners should carefully choose their cage settings with this in mind.

Dust Bath

Because of the extremely dense hair coat, chinchillas should not be bathed with water. Dampness can predispose them to fungal infections since they take a long time to dry. They enjoy dust bathing on a regular basis. Commercial bath formulas made of volcanic ash are available, as are "bath houses" that help to contain some of the dusty mess. Other people like to use cornstarch in a shallow dish or crock. Most chins really love to bathe, and it is entertaining to set out the bath and step back and watch the spin cycle! Some reports recommend limiting bathing to a few days a week to prevent eye and respiratory irritations; however, many chinchillas are allowed to bathe whenever they wish and have no problems.

Several dust formulations are available on the market. Choose one that is reasonably scent free with fine particles that will easily penetrate the thick coat. Use products that only contain volcanic ash or pumice dust and avoid unnecessary additives. The bathing area will also need to have regular cleaning since many chinchillas will urinate and defecate in their bathtub. (Remember, they are not exactly the cleanest of creatures to have in the house.)

If males and females are to be housed together, precautions are indicated, which will be discussed below.

Social Structure

Chinchillas are naturally a herd animal, and do much better in small groups than in solo housing. Unfortunately, however, female chinchillas do tend to be aggressive towards male chinchillas and can cause significant injury and even death. For this reason, many people prefer to have "single sex" groupings of chinchillas. One way around the issue is to divide the living quarters with a barrier and a small hole in the barrier. The male, being much smaller than the female, can cross the barrier to spend time with the female but also has the option to retreat to an area that the significantly larger female cannot access. Chinchillas are reasonably prolific, however, and if this option is chosen, surgical sterilization should certainly be considered. Small groupings of single sex animals are often also quite compatible and may be easier for owners to maintain.

Nutritional Requirements

Proper husbandry goes a long way to extending their life expectancy. Chinchillas are the Labrador retrievers of the rodent world. They will beg and plead themselves into all kinds of snacks that are not necessarily in their best interest. Similarly, they will eat vast quantities of food and overwhelm their intestinal tract. The average chinchilla, left to its own devices, would consume massive amounts of fruits, sweetened yogurt droplets, seeded/nut treats, and pellets, none of which relate back to the natural diet of a high fiber, low sugar, low protein combination.

Similar to rabbits and other herbivores, chinchillas are basically one giant intestinal tract with ears. From nose to tail, all of the internal organs are squeezed into corners of the body by the GI tract. They are designed to eat high fiber materials with a low nutritional content, and are programmed to spend a tremendous part of the day foraging for food. This combines with the anatomic reality of teeth that continue to grow throughout life, and the animal needs to eat a high fiber, low digestibility food. This is at complete opposite extremes with what is currently marketed in our pet stores of "chinchilla pellets" and "chinchilla treats" that are made up primarily of sugars.

A well-balanced diet is composed of a small amount (approximately 1 tablespoon per animal) of high-quality chinchilla pellets (such as Oxbow or Zupreem). These pellets should contain no dried fruits, vegetables, seeds or nuts.

The bulk of the diet should be made up of free-choice, high-quality sun-dried hay. Companies such as Oxbow produce a variety of different flavors, which can be rotated to provide variety and environmental enrichment. In general, any flavor of high-quality hay is appropriate, but alfalfa hay should be fed in small quantities, if at all. It is high in calcium and may be too rich for the chin's intestinal tract. Some green leafy vegetables such as romaine, kale, endive, escarole, and spinach can also be offered.

Chinchillas will beg for, and eat, almost anything that is sweet, loaded with carbohydrates, and is bad for them. Unfortunately, these foods can upset the bacterial flora of the intestinal tract and can result in digestive upsets, bloat, diarrhea, and death. Diabetes is being diagnosed with increasing frequency in chinchillas, and many clinicians feel that improper diet may be the root cause of this, as well. Treats should be limited to two raisin-sized treats per animal per 24 hours. Safe snacks include raisins, rose hips, apple, Cheerios, dates, and limited amounts of other fruits.

Water is an essential nutrient for chinchillas, just like all species. However, once again, the sharp teeth of the chinchilla can cause problems with their water supply. Although most learn quickly to use a water sipper-style bottle, they will commonly chew the plastic variety and

"pop" them. Glass bottles are generally better for chinchillas. Many do like to drink out of crocks as well. If using a crock, owners should monitor the chinchilla's belly. If it is becoming moist, fungal infections may set in; and a change to a water bottle may be indicated.

Appropriateness as Pets

Although chinchillas are lovely animals, they are not necessarily appropriate for all households.

Good chinchilla owners must be able to provide them a significant amount of quiet, chew-safe space, out of cage exercise time, and a carefully balanced diet to ensure dental as well as gastrointestinal health. While chinchillas are reasonably hardy creatures, their health presuppose good husbandry and nutrition. Pet stores generally do a poor job of educating owners, leaving the responsibility to veterinarians. Sadly, veterinarians are often not consulted until the animal falls ill from a preventable disease.

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