

# CHINCHILLAS

Chinchillas are quiet, shy, agile rodents that originated in the Andes Mountains of South America. Their soft coat, big ears, and great personality make them good pets. They rarely bite, but may be a little too hyperactive for some small children. If this is your first chinchilla, it is important to understand that they are *not* just small dogs or cats. They have unique requirements for their care that many new owners are not aware of. Your chinchilla veterinarian will discuss how to properly care for your new pet and keep him or her healthy and happy!

## WHAT DO I FEED MY CHINCHILLA?

Proper nutrition is one of the most important aspects of your chinchilla's health. In fact, the majority of disease conditions we see in chinchillas is due to improper diet.

Chinchillas are herbivores, and in their natural habitat, they feed mostly on coarse vegetation that is high in fiber. Therefore, unlimited amounts of *grass hay* (not alfalfa) should be offered daily. Timothy hay is a good choice.

Commercial *chinchilla pellets* are specifically formulated for chinchillas. The pellets are usually longer than rabbit or guinea pig pellets to allow easier handling by the chinchilla. If your pet store does not carry chinchilla pellets, rabbit or guinea pig pellets may be fed. Limit the pellets to 1-2 tablespoons per day.

Fresh fruits and vegetables may be fed as *treats*, though these should never be more than 10% of your chinchilla's diet (no more than 1 tsp/day). Grains, dried apples, raisins, figs, hazelnuts, and sunflower seeds should only be given occasionally as special treats.

Hard objects for gnawing are important and may include pumice stones, young tree branches (elm, ash, maple, birch), tree bark (apple, pear, or peach), or grapevines. Make sure they are washed thoroughly. Avoid cedar, plum, redwood, cherry, or oleander trees as these can be poisonous.

Finally fresh *water* provided daily is essential. If using water bottles, make sure the sipper tubes do not become clogged. Remember to wash your dishes and bottles at least weekly.

## WHERE SHOULD I KEEP MY CHINCHILLA?

You should *always* keep your chinchilla in a cage when he or she is not supervised. Because chinchillas are active animals that enjoy jumping and climbing, a large, multi-level cage is best. Cages should ideally be at least 6 x 6 x 3 feet. Wire cages provide more ventilation than solid structures, though the cage floor should be solid or covered with plastic, newspapers or a thick layer of bedding to prevent injuries to your chinchilla's feet and legs. Avoid small openings where feet or legs may get caught—fractures are very common! Appropriate *bedding* includes shredded newspaper, recycled newspaper pellets, or aspen shavings. Avoid cedar or pine shavings. The cage should be cleaned at least weekly.

Place your chinchilla's cage in a cool, dry area of the house. Chinchillas do not tolerate heat or humidity well and the temperature should never go above 80° F. Avoid placing the cage near radiators or direct sunlight.

Use your imagination to design your chinchilla's toys and cage furniture. Toilet paper rolls, Kleenex boxes, and plastic PVC pipes make great toys. Provide your chinchilla with an area for hiding or sleeping. Exercise time is also important.

Chinchillas can be housed in pairs, though females may fight if housed together.

Chinchillas should never be bathed in water. However, they do require *dust baths* to keep their fur healthy. Commercial chinchilla dust is available. Never use dirt or beach sand. It is best to offer the dust bath for 30 minutes every day. Avoid leaving the dust in the cage as it can become soiled.

Avoid access to electrical cords, frayed fabric or carpet that could be ingested, paint, houseplants, pesticides or cleaning products, tobacco/cigarette smoke, and potential predators.

## VETERINARY CARE

Chinchillas do not require any vaccinations, but should have a *physical examination* performed annually by a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about chinchillas. In older pets, blood work, urinalysis, and x-rays may be recommended.

Dental disease is very common in chinchillas. Because their teeth grow continuously, they can become overgrown, causing sharp points, drooling, pain, and an inability to eat. A good oral exam may require anesthesia. Because their bones are so fragile, fractures are another common reason to visit the veterinarian.

You should contact your veterinarian if you notice any of these signs:

Poor appetite	Abnormal stools	Overgrown teeth
Drooling	Difficulty walking	Difficulty eating
Lumps	Matted fur or flaky skin	Itchiness or hair loss
Difficulty urinating	Bleeding	Difficulty breathing
Sneezing or coughing	Discharge from nose/eyes	Listlessness

Chinchillas hide their illness until they are very sick. Seek care *early* if you suspect a problem!

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Average life span: 10 years.
- They are basically nocturnal.
- *Fur slip* or a loss of a portion of their coat can occur if handled roughly.
- Chinchillas eat *cecotrophs*. These are special feces that contain essential nutrients.
- Some antibiotics are fatal to chinchillas.
- Chinchillas were originally bred for their fur. Each hair follicle contains up to 60 hairs!
- They have been used medically for research on hearing.