

Caring for Your Chinchilla



About Chinchillas

Chinchillas are native to the Andes where they live in groups at higher elevations. Adult chinchillas are about 15-20 inches long (including the tail) and weigh about one pound. Chinchillas are long-lived animals: your pet may provide companionship for 15-20 years.

Chinchilla fur is thought to be the softest of all animals, 30 times softer than human hair. In their natural environment, this thick fur will slip off when a predator attacks leaving the chinchilla to escape.

Naturally living in large groups, chinchillas are social animals. A solitary chinchilla will require a lot of attention, and you may want to have a pair or more.

Since chinchillas are nocturnal, don't be worried if you see them sleeping during the day.

Handling

Take time for your pet to get comfortable with its new home. Spend time near its enclosure, speaking to your pet and gradually offering treats as your chinchilla moves toward you. Soon you can offer a treat on your palm and entice your pet to crawl onto your hand. Slowly your chinchilla will become comfortable

climbing on your arms and you will be able to gently pick it up and handle it.

Habitat

Chinchillas are active animals that can jump as high as 5 feet in the wild. Therefore, choose a spacious enclosure (at least 18" tall and 16" deep). A multi-level enclosure provides more opportunities for your pet to jump and climb. The habitat should have solid floors and tunnels or nest boxes where your pet can hide. An exercise wheel is essential for your chinchilla. Provide a variety of chew toys to keep your pet stimulated and to keep their constantly growing teeth worn down.

Chinchillas are adapted to a cool, dry climate so keep the enclosure out of direct sunlight and away from drafts. Temperature in your pet's enclosure should not exceed 80°F. Chinchillas release excess heat through their ears, so if your chinchilla is getting too hot, you may notice the skin in its ears becoming red, with visible red veins.

Shredded paper is a good bedding substrate. Avoid pine and cedar shavings. Any soiled bedding should be removed daily, and completely change all bedding weekly.

Food bowls or hay racks are an important part of your chinchilla's habitat. A removable dust bin will allow your pet to clean its fur.

Thoroughly clean your pet's habitat (including bowls, toys, hiding places) monthly with hot

soapy water. Completely disinfect the habitat by adding two to three drops of bleach to one gallon of water, then immerse or wipe the cage, dishes and toys with the solution. Thoroughly rinse all items with hot water to remove all traces of bleach.

Grooming/Cleaning

Chinchillas are naturally clean animals with very little odor. In their naturally dry environment, they clean themselves by taking dust baths a few times a week to remove oil and dirt.

Because of the density of chinchilla fur, regular water bathing (the way you might bathe a dog or cat) is not a good idea, as it can be very difficult for the fur to dry and this can lead to bacterial or fungal infection. Allow your pet chinchilla to dust-bathe only in store-bought chinchilla dust.

Water and Food

Chinchillas are rather active small pets and should be kept at a healthy weight—not obese, and not too thin. Your chinchilla should have constant access to a high-quality commercial pelleted food and clean, fresh water.

More ...

This information is designed as a basic guide. There are several books and online resources available which provide in-depth information on chinchillas and their care.

Hay is important for roughage. High quality Timothy hay or alfalfa hay should be part of the daily diet. Hay will also help wear down your pet's teeth.

You can also feed small amounts of fruits (dried fruits are a favorite treat), nuts and vegetables, but you should not feed chinchillas treats in amounts that exceed 10 percent of their diet.

Chinchillas will consume their own droppings. This is normal behavior and an adaptation to get adequate nutrition in their natural living conditions.

Keeping Your Chinchilla Healthy

Clean habitat and the proper diet will go along way toward keeping your pet healthy. Observe your chinchilla regularly for signs of a healthy animal or symptoms of illness.

- Your chinchilla's eyes should be clear and clean, without any discharge or a watery appearance.
- Bright, happy and alert disposition: any signs of lethargy, distressed or labored breathing, an unsteady gate or disinterest in their surroundings can indicate a problem.
- A chinchilla's teeth grow continuously throughout its life, and malocclusion (misaligned teeth) can occur at any time.

Regularly examine your chinchilla's teeth for developing problems; additionally, keep an eye out for excessive drooling as this can be an indication of a dental problem. Chinchillas are born with white teeth that turn yellow as they age, which is completely normal.

- A chinchilla's coat should be healthy and free of bare areas, skin lesions or scaly patches. Chinchillas are prone to ringworm, a fungal infection that is contagious and transmittable to humans. Seek veterinary care immediately if you suspect that your chinchilla has ringworm. Chinchillas are also prone to mites.
- Chinchillas should have a clean anus that is free of any droppings sticking to the fur. Droppings should be a dark brown or a brownish-black color, slightly oval in shape and somewhat moist. Watch for signs of mucus or other abnormalities (such as strange shapes or a sticky texture) that could indicate a health-related problem and contact your veterinarian anytime you notice anything out of the ordinary.
- Male and female genitals should be dry, clean and free of discharge or bleeding. Regularly check your male chinchilla's penis for "hair rings," which are strands of hair that get wrapped around the penis and could be fatal if not removed immediately. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to gently remove the hairs if you have a male chinchilla.

It's not a bad idea to arrange a visit to the vet on your way home from picking up your new chinchilla. The vet will check and make sure

your pet is healthy and can answer any other questions you might have.

Avoiding Human Illness

Chinchillas may carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans, including ringworm. The simple precautions below can help prevent the risk of infection.

- ✓ Closely supervise children and make sure they wash their hands with soap and water after handling small animals, their habitats or anything in their habitats.
- ✓ As cute and cuddly as they are, do not kiss small animals. Illnesses are sometimes spread this way.
- ✓ Never use food-preparation areas to clean small animal habitats or anything in their habitats. If you clean the habitat in the bathroom, disinfect the area completely afterwards.
- ✓ Clean the habitat, food and water bowls in a well-ventilated area.

Children under 5, pregnant women, senior citizens, and people with weakened immune systems run a greater risk of infection; contact your health care provider for more information.

