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## CHINCHILLA CARE

Chinchillas originated in the Andes Mountains in South America. They were brought to the United States in the early 1900's, and were raised primarily as fur producing animals. Over time, their gentle and charming personalities have won them a place as increasingly popular house pets.

Chinchillas are herbivorous (plant eating) rodents that thrive at cool temperatures. They enjoy climbing and jumping, as well as investigating any small spaces they can squeeze into. Their average lifespan is 8-10 years, with a few being reported to live as long as 20 years. Puberty occurs at around 9 months of age, and pregnancy lasts about 110 days. The average litter is 2 with a range of 1-6. Young are born with their eyes open, and begin eating some solid food by a week of age. Weaning occurs at 6-8 weeks.

Chinchillas should be housed in a fairly large cage, at least 3'x2'x2'. They enjoy multilevel platforms to jump and climb on, especially if they are to be confined to their cage much of the time. Cardboard boxes with holes cut in them are great for this purpose. Other cage furniture can include large exercise wheels but care should be taken with smaller chinchillas to prevent injury. A nesting-type box for hiding is also essential since chinchillas are nocturnal animals and will be sleeping during most of the daylight hours. Supervised time out of the cage for socialization and exercise is also important; just make sure it is in an area that is "chinchilla proofed" - no electric cords that they can chew, no toxic plants, etc. Early evening is the best time for this activity to allow for the normal sleeping patterns of chinchillas.

Bedding can consist of plain sheets of newspaper, recycled newspaper litter, or aspen chips. Avoid cedar or pine shavings, as they contain oils that can be potentially liver toxic, as well as causing skin and respiratory irritation. Shredded corncob should also be avoided because of its dustiness and the potential for fungal contamination.

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Chinchillas are very clean animals. Once or twice a week they should be given access to a shallow dish of chinchilla dust to bathe in. This dust helps keep their fur in good condition, preventing matting and other problems. Remove the dust after about 30 minutes to prevent soiling of the dust and irritation of the eyes secondary to prolonged contact with the dust. Chinchillas are more comfortable at cool temperatures, preferably 70 degrees F or less. Environmental temperatures over 80 degrees put them at risk for heat stroke, especially if humidity is also high.



*Photo from [www.gopetsamerica.com/.../chinchilla\\_pet.aspx](http://www.gopetsamerica.com/.../chinchilla_pet.aspx)*

A good diet for chinchillas should consist of good quality grass hay, such as timothy hay, offered free choice. The fiber in this hay is important to keep the digestive tract healthy and to help prevent dental overgrowth. In addition to the hay, 1-2 tablespoons of chinchilla pellets per chinchilla should be fed daily. Fresh vegetables such as broccoli, dandelion leaves, etc. can also be fed. Small amounts of fruit can be offered as a treat. Avoid foods that are high in starches such as seeds, breads, etc. as these can cause severe digestive problems. Water should be provided in rodent water bottles and hung on the outside of the cage to prevent the chinchilla from chewing the bottle. Food and water should always be clean and fresh to avoid gastric disturbances.

One of the most common health problems seen in chinchillas is dental overgrowth, or "slobbers." Affected animals may drool, act hungry but drop food from their mouths, and lose weight. Chinchillas' teeth grow continuously, and if they do not have a constant supply of fibrous food such as grass hay or fresh grass to wear them down they can develop spurs that can cut into the tongue or cheeks. This condition can also occur less commonly with congenital problems with how the teeth are aligned, so they do not wear down properly. Treatment consists of trimming the affected teeth under anesthesia, antibiotics if there has been damage to the tongue or cheeks, and supportive care and pain medications to try to get the animal eating again. Severely affected animals may not be able to recover.

Another relatively common injury that can happen with incorrect handling or stress is called "tail slip." This is a condition that happens to chinchillas when they are severely frightened, stressed, or with incorrect handling. Care should be taken when handling chinchillas not to pull their tails and to prevent undue stress. When this injury happens, surgical tail amputation is needed and your veterinarian should be contacted immediately.

There are a host of other common health conditions in chinchillas, ranging from pneumonia and abscesses to cardiomyopathy (a form of heart failure) and tumors. Chinchillas are good at masking the signs of disease until they are very ill, so careful attention should be paid to even subtle changes in appetite or activity, with veterinary intervention as soon as possible if there is a concern. Annual exams are recommended to help detect early medical problems.

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