

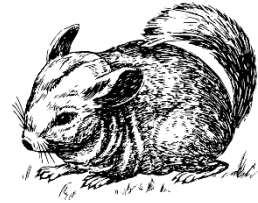


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## Caring for your Chinchilla



### Your Chinchilla:

The chinchilla is a small mammal native to South America. Originally found in the Andes Mountains of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. The last free-living chinchillas are found in the mountains of northern Chile. They are perfectly adapted to the rough conditions of their natural habitat: wind, cold, and dryness.

The normal wild-type chinchilla is a smoky blue-grey (standard grey). There are many other colours including black velvet, beige, white, ebony, violet, and sapphire. These colours serve as the basis for colour mutations such as tan, brown velvet, mosaic, pink-white, etc.

Your Chinchilla can live between 6-10 years. Some have been known to live longer! Here are some following tips to help you care for your chinchilla and give them the best life possible.

### Chinchilla accommodation:

#### **Cage size:**

Chinchillas are very active and so require a great deal of space with multiple levels for jumping and climbing. The minimum dimensions should be 50 cm (20 in) wide and 150 cm (60 in) high with a volume of at least 3 m<sup>3</sup> (800 gallon). For each additional animal at least 0.5 m<sup>3</sup> are required. Remember the larger the cage the better and you should regularly handle your chinchilla to allow them time out of their cage.

#### **Cage design:**

The cage should be made of wire mesh as Chinchillas are very good at chewing through wood. This mesh should be of small gauge (15mm x 15mm) in order to prevent limb injury.

The floor should be solid and covered with aspen shavings or recycled paper product to absorb any excess liquid. Too much fluid on their fur can cause fur damage. Take care to check your chinchilla does not eat any recycled paper and change this if necessary.

Chinchillas prefer a nest box over too much substrate on the floors. The nest box should be a minimum of 20cm<sup>3</sup> and can be lined with hay. A separate hide box should be provided for each chinchilla and placed on different levels of the enclosure. Usually, the highest hide box is the preferred sleeping area.

As well as the nest box ensure your chinchilla has tunnels and hideaways so they can rest adequately. These can be PVC piping or cork caves etc.

Place a small tray i.e. a litter tray for your chinchilla to use as its toilet area. This can then be cleaned daily if used and the remainder of the cage cleaned once a week. Otherwise more frequent cage cleaning may be required.

Provide free choice access to dust baths using commercially available chinchilla dust. Clean or sieve the sand regularly. This sand bath should only be provided for short periods each day as otherwise they will spend all day in the bath!

Chinchillas also require material for gnawing or chewing to reduce the risk of dental overgrowth. Branches of unsprayed deciduous trees (e.g. hazelnut, willow, birch) are suitable; do not offer branches from stone fruit trees or conifer trees.

### **Enrichment:**

To help keep your chinchilla mentally and physically active try hiding their food around the enclosure, so they must search for it. Avoid using a bowl and having them sit in one place.

Chinchillas require 30 minutes of active play outside their cage each day. This also allows you time to handle and bond with your chinchilla. Have a safe area set up in which you can play with your chinchilla. Ensure there is nothing unsafe they can chew and they are unable to escape. You can play with toys such as a small ball, which they can push along and hide treats in various places for them to find.

You can also provide a wheel in the enclosure for your chinchilla. The “Flying saucer” exercise wheels are preferable over “regular” exercise wheels to minimize the risk of back and limb problems. The larger “flying saucer” wheels do not force the animal into an abnormal hyperextended back position, but individuals can still develop limb problems due to abnormal loading of joints and muscles. For this reason, we do not recommend leaving the wheel in their cage but placing it in for various periods of the day.

### **Where to place your chinchillas:**

Chinchillas easily succumb to heat stress at temperatures exceeding 22°C. Temperatures between 18.3-20°C are ideal. Be sure to place your chinchilla cage in a room that does not get too warm. You should also ensure it is not too busy an area but also not too quiet. This ensures that your chinchilla can rest but is able to interact with you when active.

Chinchillas should not be housed near rabbits. Even healthy rabbits can harbour a variety of bacteria that can cause morbidity or mortality.

### **Cage mates:**

Chinchilla's form bonded pairs and can happily live in multi-sex and multi chinchilla groups. Ensure your cage size is adequate for the number of chinchillas you wish to have.

To avoid unwanted litters, you should neuter one or both of the sexes. Males can be castrated from 6 months and females can be spayed from 7 months.

## **Chinchilla behaviour**

Chinchillas are generally shy creatures, so require gentle handling to become used to you. They are very affectionate once they know you and will make chirping noises when content. If frightened they can bark, bite and exhibit fur slip, this is where patches of fur will drop out and can take weeks to grow back. Although every measure is taken to prevent this, fur slip can unfortunately happen during a vet visit, especially if the chinchilla is not used to being handled.

As mentioned above chinchilla are very active so provide lots of toys and enrichment to keep them busy.

## **Handling your chinchilla**

Chinchillas are relatively easy to restrain, however they can become quite quick and prone to struggle. Allow your chinchilla to become used to your hand and smell before attempting to pick them up. Do this frequently over a few days. You may even find that they will hop up onto your outstretched hand if given enough time.

When picking them up for the first few times you can dim the lights and reduce any noise to help them feel calmer. Place one hand firmly under their chest and the other hand under their hind limbs and bottom, supporting their weight.

Allow your chinchilla to hide their head in the crook of your arm. You may also use a towel to pick up your chinchilla and allow them to hide in this whilst being handled. However, take care they do not get too hot wrapped up in a towel.

Please never hold the tip of your chinchilla's tail. They may attempt to flee and this may break their tail. As mentioned above fur slip may occur when handled. Do not be alarmed as this will grow back. However, if fur is falling out without being handled please contact us for a health check.

## **Diet**

The natural diet of chinchillas consists of grasses, cactus fruits, dry roots and tubers, as well as the bark and leaves of small shrubs and bushes. Almost all food items are high in dietary fibre with little fat, sugar, or protein. The digestive system of chinchillas is perfectly adapted to these nourishments, the long intestine guarantees an optimal utilization of the sparse food.

Captive animals should be fed a high-fibre diet, similarly low in protein, sugar, and fat. The bulk of the diet should consist of high-quality grass hay. The hay must always be freely available, dry, and free of odour, mould, or dust. Dried herbs and high-fibre chinchilla or chinchilla pellets, approximately 15-30 ml (1-2 teaspoons) per animal per day, can be offered. Small quantities of fresh vegetables can also be fed.

The digestive system of the chinchilla is perfectly adapted to extract energy and nutrients from a barren food supply, which puts captive animals at risk for obesity and hepatic lipidosis. Do not feed high-fat foods, like nuts and seeds, or foods rich in sugar, like fruits (e.g. raisins).

Water has to be freely available. In the wild, chinchillas nibble rain drops from leaves or stones. It is best to provide water in a drip-feeder bottles. Chinchilla fur is prone to matting when wet and damage can occur. Therefore the bottles should be checked regularly for any leaks.

### **Medical conditions**

Commonly seen conditions include:

- Barbering or fur chewing
- Dental disease, dental abscess
- Gastrointestinal stasis
- Gastroenteritis (Since the natural chinchilla diet is low in water, significant amounts of fresh produce can lead to diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal disturbances.)
- Heat stress
- Obesity
- Orthopaedic injury (fractures)
- Penile hair rings

Frequent handling of your pet will allow you to spot any issues. Always ensure your chinchilla is eating and drinking their normal amount but also not struggling to do this. You should also ensure they are passing normal urine and faeces and again not struggling when they do this. If you notice any change in their behaviour this could be an early warning sign that something is wrong. Closely monitor your chinchilla and call us for an appointment should you be worried.

We recommend annual health checks with our vets to ensure your chinchilla is healthy and allow any problems to be addressed early.

### **Insurance**

Unfortunately, we can never predict what may happen to our chinchillas, so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your pet is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your chinchilla for its whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your chinchilla for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.

