

Free-ranging chinchillas live in caves under rocks in the South American Andes Mountains. They thrive in low temperature and low humidity environments. Chinchillas have been raised domestically for fur for many decades. The pet industry is supplied by hobby breeders. Chinchilla fur is considered the softest in the world. The fur is so dense that skin parasites, such as fleas, cannot live. The most common species in captivity is Chinchilla lanigera. Chinchillas are rodents and are more related to guinea pigs than to rabbits. They are characterized by their large hind feet, chubby round bodies, soft dense fur, large eyes and ears, long whiskers and squirrel-like tails. The original silver-gray color now shares popularity with color mutations, such as black, white, charcoal, beige and tan.

Zoological Education Network provides educational materials about exotic companion animals.

Most Common Disorders of Chinchillas

Fungal dermatitis
Trauma (broken bones, wounds)
Diarrhea/constipation
Respiratory/eye infections
Convulsions
Dental disorders (abnormal growth)
Penile hair rings in males
“Fur barbering” from stress
Heat stroke
Choking/bloating
Cardiac disease

Although chinchillas are basically hardy and suffer from few serious illnesses, regular health checks should be scheduled with an exotic animal veterinarian to prevent problems and to promote a long, satisfying relationship with your pet. For help in finding a small mammal veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians (AEMV) by visiting www.AEMV.org and click on “Find an Exotic Mammal Vet.”

©2009 Zoological Education Network
800-946-4782 561-641-6745 www.exoticdvm.com

CHINCHILLAS



Companion Exotic Mammal Care
S E R I E S

What to Expect from Your Chinchilla

Chinchillas are intelligent, charming creatures that quickly become bonded to their owners. They are easy to care for and have little odor. Basically nocturnal, chinchillas can be active during the day. They are fast, agile climbers, and they love to investigate everything, chewing up bits of paper, cardboard, or untreated wood along the way.

Although chinchillas tend to urinate in their cage or litter box, they are difficult to litter-train with respect to their small, hard, dry fecal pellets, which are produced in abundance. However, the fecal pellets are easy to remove and have little odor.

One peculiarity of chinchillas is their need to bathe in fine dust. Bath dust is commercially available, and at least once or twice a week, the chinchilla should be allowed to roll (bathe) in the dust.

When chinchillas are stressed, they will chew their fur off, a process referred to as “fur-barbering.” Diarrhea (soft droppings) may also occur in an unhappy chinchilla.

Are Chinchillas Tame?

Chinchillas are one of the most affectionate rodents. They rarely bite and prefer to be cuddled and carried. Only if they feel trapped or are restrained against their will, will they bite aggressively. However, a cornered or angry chinchilla will rear up on its hind legs and spray urine at the aggressor.

Are Chinchillas Tame?

A chinchilla that is trying to escape can release clumps of fur from its body, leaving a large bald patch. The fur will grow back with time.

Life span: 9-17 years

Vital Statistics

Body length: 8-10 inches (20-25 cm)

Body weight: 1-2 lb (453-907 g)
(female is larger than male)

Sexual maturity: 7-10 months

Life span: 9-17 years

Is Your Chinchilla a Male or a Female?

Male chinchillas do not have a scrotum, and the testes mostly remain in the abdominal cavity. The easiest way to sex these rodents is by the anogenital distance: female chinchillas have a very short distance between their anus and their urinary and reproductive opening, while males have a wider gap between their anus and penis.

Female chinchillas should be bred young or their pelvis will fuse and they may have difficulty giving birth.

What Should You Feed Your Chinchilla?

A commercial pelleted diet formulated for chinchillas and unlimited timothy hay provide an adequate diet for chinchillas. Adults require 1-2 tablespoons of pellets daily. Small amounts of alfalfa (loose or cubed) may also be provided. Treats such as raisins, fresh carrot or green vegetables may be offered sparingly, but sunflower seeds, peanuts, and other fatty foods should be avoided to prevent obesity. Adding nutritional supplements, such as HEALx Sunshine Factor,* may be beneficial. A sipper tube or water bottle is the best way to provide a clean, plentiful supply of water.

Where Should You House Your Chinchilla?

Chinchillas are very active and are able to leap 3 feet (91 cm) straight up in the air. The larger the enclosure, the better—one that is 3 x 2 x 2 feet (1.0 x 0.6 x 0.6 m) is a good starting point. Welded wire mesh is acceptable with solid flooring in one area. Multiple levels should be provided in the enclosure for jumping and climbing—wooden perches or non-pesticide laden tree branches work well.

*www.HEAL-x.com

What Your Veterinarian Looks for in a Healthy Chinchilla

Large, bright eyes
with no discharge

Alert and active,
inquisitive

Fluffy, dense
fur all over

Round, chubby body

No matting or missing
patches of fur

Teeth aligned
properly

Pink foot pads, no
evidence of sores



How to Keep Your Chinchilla Healthy, Happy and Safe!

✓ Allow chinchillas to sleep in the daytime (they are nocturnal).

✓ Schedule a daily exercise/play time with direct contact of 30-60 minutes.

✓ Provide dust baths only, not water baths.

✓ Supervise fully when the chinchilla is out of its enclosure.

✓ Offer a consistent diet to prevent gastrointestinal upset.

✓ Provide safe wood objects or branches for gnawing, as their teeth grow continuously throughout life.

✓ Restrain gently to avoid fur “slip.”

✓ Schedule regular veterinary visits, especially for dental checks.

Housing for your chinchilla should:

✓ provide a cool and dry environment (optimal temperature is 50-68°F [10-20°C] with humidity less than 40%)

✓ provide space for a dust box (sheet metal = 6 x 6 x 9 inches [15 x 15 x 23 cm])

✓ include a hiding box in a top corner for sleeping

✓ be separate for each chinchilla

✓ include suitable substrates, such as shredded paper (non-inked), recycled newspaper composite materials or pellets, hardwood chips or shavings and compressed wheat straw. Cedar chips should be avoided as they may be toxic

✓ have multi-level perches or pesticide-free branches for climbing

✓ be as large as possible because chinchillas are active, agile creatures

It is important to prevent chinchillas from accessing:

✗ electrical cords

✗ dogs, cats, ferrets and other potential predators

✗ direct sunlight

✗ temperatures higher than 80°F (26°C)

✗ water baths

✗ hay with mold, insects, insecticides or fecal contamination

✗ high-fat treats

✗ unsupervised freedom in the home

Text by Susan Leck, DVM
Photography by Mimi Cotter