



Chinchilla Information Sheet

Chinchillas are small, rabbit-sized rodents which originated in the cold mountains of the upper Andes in Peru, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina. They have become increasingly popular as pets but are still classed as an “exotic”. They are most active at dawn and dusk and require peace and quiet to sleep during the day. They also have very specific diet and housing needs and require specialist care.

Diet.

Chinchillas require a simple diet. It should consist of good quality hay and chinchilla pellets. Occasional treats should be healthy and low in sugar. Fresh water should be available at all times. **Chinchillas should not be fed fresh vegetables or fruit since these can lead to diarrhoea and bloat.**

Hay and Dried Grass.

This is the most important part of a chinchilla’s diet. Good quality hay or dried grass provides fibre to keep the digestive system functioning well and also keeps the teeth short. Good pet shops will have a variety of hays available, including timothy hay, meadow hay, orchard grass, brome hay etc. Dried grasses can also be used in addition to hay and include Readigrass, and Just Grass etc. Alfalfa hay is high in calcium and should only be fed sparingly as a treat once a week.

Chinchilla Pellets.

Although they seem boring to us, chinchilla pellets have everything a chinchilla needs. An adult chinchilla will usually eat around 2 tablespoons (40g) of chinchilla pellets per day. Chinchillas will eat all the tasty bits from a chinchilla mix and leave the rest. It is better to feed a good quality chinchilla pellet and give an occasional treat rather than trying to ensure the chinchilla eats all the ingredients in a mix.

Treats.

Healthy treats can be given in small amounts (usually 1 or 2 per day) but only after the chinchilla has finished all pellets and hay. Some examples of healthy treats include: mini shredded wheat, dried rosehips, the “Naturals” range of treats for chinchillas, dried herb and flower mixes (specifically for chinchillas), and jumbo oats.

Dried fruits are usually high in sugar content and should only be provided very occasionally, in tiny pieces – this includes raisins.

Nuts and seeds (e.g. sunflower seeds, peanuts, cashews etc) should be avoided because of their high fat content. High fat foods can lead to fatty liver disease and obesity.

Housing & Environment.

Chinchillas require a cool, dry environment free from drafts and out of direct sunlight. The cage should be positioned somewhere that is quiet during the day to allow for sleep but where the chinchilla can receive attention during the evening. Tall cages are best avoided. Chinchillas are natural rock hoppers. Falls from tall cages can lead to serious injuries and/or broken bones. Suitable cages are long and wide with plenty of extra wooden shelving and environmental enrichment. Avoid plastic cages – chinchillas will chew them.

Hammocks, tunnels, carpet rolls, untreated sea grass matting, wooden platforms, “chin-chillers”, terracotta plant pots etc are all suitable cage furnishings which provided added interest and comfort.

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Exercise.

Chinchillas love freedom to explore however they are good at getting themselves into trouble. Ensuring the environment is “chinchilla safe” can be a challenge – they love to chew so wires must be safely covered or kept out of the way entirely. Chemicals and plants should be removed for safety, toilet seats should be down/closed, and washing up bowls or sinks should be emptied. Other pets (dogs and cats) must be kept away whilst the chinchilla is out of its cage. Exercise must always be supervised and the time allowed out of the cage built up gradually.

Never exercise a chinchilla in warm weather or when the room temperature is above 18 degrees – chinchillas can overheat quickly.

Toys.

Not all products advertised for chinchillas are suitable for them. Avoid plastic toys, rodent exercise balls (chinchillas can overheat easily, leading to heat stroke), and anything with rope (e.g. parrot toys) which can be chewed and swallowed. Soft fruit tree twigs and branches are excellent as chew toys, along with untreated wood shapes, willow toys, cholla, untreated loofah (“Crispy Chews”), old fashioned wooden dolly pegs, Thermalite blocks, and other small pieces of untreated wood.

Handling.

Chinchillas can be nervous and not every chinchilla likes to be held or handled. Some chinchillas will be naturally inquisitive and will explore their owner, allowing them to be handled as they do so. Others do not like being held at all and will struggle to escape at the first opportunity.

Gently stroking around the chinchilla’s ears, under the chin, and down the front of the chest is a good way of bonding with your pet. Often the chinchilla will gently nibble you back – this is a sign of affection.

Chinchillas should be held close to your body, with one hand firmly holding the base of the chinchilla’s tail and their body weight supported in your arms or against your chest. Chinchillas have delicate bones and should never be grabbed or squeezed around the middle.

General.

Chinchillas keep their fur clean by grooming and by bathing in special chinchilla dust/sand. Access to dust baths should be provided for 10-20 minutes 2-3 times per week. This is sufficient to allow the chinchilla to clean its fur but also prevents the skin from becoming too dry and itchy.

Chinchillas love company; whether human or chinchilla companion. They can be kept individually as long as plenty of time is spent with them to prevent boredom and loneliness.

Contrary to popular belief, chinchillas can be kept in same sex pairs quite successfully. Any pair of chinchillas (same or mixed sex) can fall out without warning and fights can be vicious, despite the chinchillas’ cuddly appearance. To avoid unwanted kits, chinchillas should be paired in same sex pairs or the male should be neutered in a mixed sex pairing.

Health.

A healthy chinchilla will have bright, clear eyes, a dry nose, orange teeth (unless young), a clean coat, and no odour.

Illness.

Chinchillas are very good at hiding pain and illness. The first sign of a problem requires veterinary assessment and treatment.

Dental Disease is the most common problem seen in chinchillas. Their teeth grow constantly so a good diet with plenty of high fibre and lots of hard toys to chew can help to keep the teeth worn down. Signs are weepy eyes, dribbling, grinding teeth in pain, loss of appetite, crumbling pellets, pawing at the mouth, small droppings and weight loss.



Sprains and Broken Bones

Chinchillas can be clumsy and accident prone, especially when out exercising or thundering about in their cages. Signs are limping and holding a paw up, not weight bearing on a leg, not eating, quiet and withdrawn or hiding.

Digestive Problems.

Droppings and eating habits are the best indicators of chinchilla health. Their digestive system is easily upset. A chinchilla which has a sudden change in droppings or in eating needs veterinary care straight away. The most common problem is diarrhoea, usually brought about by too many treats, a contaminated food source, bacterial infection, or a sudden change in diet.

Bloat is a condition caused by a build up of gas in the gut which is extremely painful for the animal and can be fatal. It requires emergency treatment. Signs are lack of eating, reduction in or complete absence of droppings, grinding teeth, pressing the belly or rolling on the floor and/or stretching up in pain, and a hard, bloated belly (chin looks like a ball suddenly).

Constipation – sometimes caused by dehydration or lack of fibre. Signs are small, hard droppings, lack of appetite and lethargy.

Other conditions include skin complaints, abscesses, prolapsed penis, bite wounds, kidney problems, respiratory infections, and fits/seizures.

