

Introduction to Chinchilla Care

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Chinchillas originate from South America. They live on the western slope of the Andes Mountains in Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina where the environment is dry, windy and cool. They are social animals living in colonies among the rock falls of the mountain slopes.

Chinchillas are wonderful pets! They rarely bite and many like to be cuddled and carried. This handout will help you provide basic care for your new pet chinchilla.

Behavior

Chinchillas are nocturnal animals but can be active during the day. They are very fast and agile, and they like to play and jump high (up to 5 feet!) Chinchillas will learn to urinate only in their enclosure, however, it is difficult for them to learn to defecate only in their enclosure or a litter box.

Diet

A chinchilla's diet consists of hay and pelleted food. It is best to purchase a high quality pelleted food specifically for chinchillas. We recommend Oxbow Chinchilla Deluxe pellets. These are available at our clinic or online at www.oxbowhay.com. Some pet stores carry Oxbow products as well. Place a handful or approximately 1 ounce of pelleted food in your pet's bowl each day. Heavy ceramic food bowls are best because they are difficult for your chin to flip over, they are chew-proof (unlike plastic bowls), and they are easily cleaned.

Chinchillas should have fresh timothy hay available at all times. Avoid legume hays such as alfalfa which are higher in calories and lower in fiber. Choose a hay that smells sweet, is green in color, has few stems, and is free of dust, mud, mold and insects. Oxbow sells a high quality timothy hay. We always have some on hand at the clinic as well.

Hay and pellets should be changed daily. Remove all hay and/or pellets that have become wet. This will avoid mold from developing which can be toxic and result in the death of your chin. Any hay or pellets contaminated with fecal material should also be removed daily. Be sure your chin's hay and pellets are free of insecticides.

Treats can be given to chinchillas to supplement their diet. They should only be given in small portions not to exceed 1 teaspoon per day. Treats may include: dried fruits (like raisins), nuts, sunflower seeds, various green vegetables, and carrots.

Water should be available at all times. Be sure to offer water in heavy ceramic bowls or water bottles to avoid spilling. Change your pet's water daily to keep it fresh.

Pregnant or breeding chinchillas should be supplemented with 30-60 mg of Vitamin E daily.

Caging

Chinchillas need a large enclosure that provides plenty of room for exercise and has platforms or ledges at different levels. Chins love to leap up and down from one platform to another. Local pet stores sell wooden ledges that can be attached to most wire cages. They also enjoy chewing on these wooden platforms/ledges. The caging should be durable and easy to clean. High sides and a secure top will help keep your chinchilla from escaping. Chinchillas can jump as high as 5 feet! Caging should be cleaned at least once weekly if not more frequently.

Offer a dust bath to your chinchilla several times a week. There is nothing more fun than watching a chinchilla enjoy a dust bath. They love it! Pet stores sell plastic or ceramic dust bath "houses" for chinchillas. It is important not to leave the dust bath in your pet's enclosure all day. Over bathing can cause particles to become lodged in the eye resulting in an infection. Ideally the dust in the box should be at least 2" deep. Blue Cloud chinchilla dust or 9 parts Silver Sand and 1 part Fuller's Earth may be used in the dust bath. Dust should be changed once weekly.

Chinchillas also like to sleep in enclosed areas. A separate box or hide for sleeping should be placed in the enclosure.

Provide various toys to entertain your chinchilla with when she is alone. Cardboard oatmeal canisters, paper towel rolls and wooden chew toys are some possibilities. Durable toys of wood and rope made for parrots can be hung from the top of the cage. Keep changing the toys you offer to prevent your chin from becoming bored.

Heat Stroke

Chinchillas have very dense fur designed for living in cooler climates. It is important to keep in mind that summer weather that is comfortable for you might be too hot for your pet. When the temperature climbs into the upper 70's and higher, it is time to start thinking about cooling off your chin. One way to do this is to place blocks of ice in the cage (soda bottles filled with water and then frozen work well.) Bowls of ice cubes are also fine. A fan or air conditioner in the chinchilla's room is a great way to bring down the temperature. Be sure that the fan or air conditioner is not blowing directly on the cage, however. Another alternative is to move your chinchilla to a cool basement during very hot days. If you notice any of the following

signs of heat stroke, wrap your chin in a cool (NOT COLD) wet towel and call us immediately: rapid breathing, bright red ears, lethargy or lying on her side, thick, stringy saliva, or diarrhea. Heat stroke is a very serious condition in your chinchilla and can quickly lead to death. Seek help right away!

Handling

Chinchillas are very active, agile animals. When handling a chinchilla, be sure to secure the animal so that it cannot leap out of your hands and fall to the floor. Always support your chinchilla with two hands. Place one hand underneath the body and use your other hand to hold her close to you.

Preventive Care

Whenever you bring a new chinchilla into your home, a new pet exam should be performed. Yearly exams after that will help us ensure your pet's continued good health. Call us if you notice any of the following: lack of appetite, fur loss, dry skin, loose stools, trouble breathing, or trauma to any part of the body. If you notice that your chinchilla has a wet face, chest, or forepaws, he may need to have his teeth checked for a tooth trim. Unfortunately, teeth problems are common in chinchillas and if not addressed early on, can lead to serious health issues. Many chins with bad teeth become dangerously thin because they don't want to eat due to the pain associated with chewing. If your chin stops eating, please call us right away.

Congratulations on the new addition to your family! We look forward to working with you to keep your chinchilla healthy and strong throughout his life. If you have any questions about caring for your chinchilla, please give us a call. We are happy to help in whatever way we can.