

Guide to Chinchillas

Housing

Chinchillas are busy, active, inquisitive animals and they need plenty of space to jump and play. When it comes to choosing their cage, your motto should be 'the bigger the better'. You should provide a safe resting area; nest boxes are ideal, and plenty of shelves and or ledges for them to hop onto.

A constant temperature is ideal; the cage needs to be out of direct sunlight and away from draughts and radiators. They can bear the cold quite well but are prone to overheating. At temperatures over 25°C Chinchillas cool themselves down by sending blood to their large ears, so red ears can be a sign of overheating. It is ideal to place a cool tile – (Granite or Marble works well) in the cage that they can lie on to cool themselves in warmer climates.



Exercise and Play

The cage can make a perfect playground, especially if there are varying levels, ledges, etc. A scattering of wooden chewing blocks increases the fun, as does hiding healthy snacks around the cage.

You can also have your pet out for playtime and exercise, however you must be very careful to make the room escape – proof and chew – proof! Especially to safeguard wires that they could chew. To be safer a playpen can be used.



Handling



Chinchillas are by nature, timid creatures, so allow a few days of settling when you first get them home. Talk softly to them, but avoid touching initially. It is good to try and build up a bond of trust – you can start this by hand feeding, then move to stroking and finally to picking up, using slow gentle movements. Pick up by putting one hand firmly under bottom, and the other over the back and pull into your chest with the head facing you. If you handle them regularly they will become relaxed with this. Chinchillas rarely bite, but they are very sensitive to rough handling and

show their distress in other ways. They can 'slip' their fur if they feel threatened or are grabbed too tight. Never pick them up by the tail. It is good to allow them to walk onto an open palm and they can walk from hand to hand as they feel comfortable.

Grooming

Chinchillas need to groom themselves using a sand or dust bath, which needs to be provided at least 3-4 times a week but ideally daily. They tend to use it as a toilet if left in too long so best to be removed once

finished. They do not like to be brushed and you can damage their fur, also it is important not to get them wet.

Neutering

If your Chinchillas are male it is best to neuter them to avoid aggression, also if housed with a female partner to avoid pregnancy. Females can live together without the need for neutering.

Feeding

Chinchillas need two types of fibre – digestible and indigestible fibre. To ensure that they extract as much of the nutritional value of their food as they can ‘fibrevores’ re-ingest it, this means that it goes through their digestive system twice.



Indigestible fibre is moved through their digestive system and excreted as hard droppings. This acts to keep the digestive system moving and stimulate appetite.

Digestible fibre is moved up into an organ called the caecum-this is like a giant appendix. Good bacteria in the caecum ferment the fibre which emerges in sticky clumps – called Caecotrophs. Chinchillas then eat these and their systems extract essential nutrition as the digestible fibre passes through a second time.

This is why it is important to have a good complete diet, museli style foods can encourage selective feeding, as chinchillas have a sweet tooth and will pick certain bits out and leave the rest. This can lead to an imbalanced diet, lacking in Calcium, Phosphorus and Vitamin D. They should have access to fresh water at all times, premium quality hay and grass should make up the majority of their diet. They can have healthy hay type snacks (Excel nature snacks are good) and fruits and vegetables – in small amounts, around a teaspoon a day is fine. Some foods should be avoided.

Good treats – Apple, Blueberry, Carrot, Celery, Grape, Orange, Cooked Potato, Pumpkin, Squash, Cooked Sweet Potato, Raisins

Bad treats – Asparagus, Peas, Cabbage, Corn, Lettuce, Broccoli, Rhubarb, Spinach

Poisonous Plants (not an exhaustive list, but some common plants that are harmful to Chinchillas are – Foxglove, lily, rose, periwinkle, aloe vera, boxwood, amaryllis, apple leaf, cherry laurel, gaultheria, poppy, tulip, fern, all ivy, tomato plant, hyacinth, primrose, daffodil, autumn crocus, mistletoe, all olives, delphinium, geranium, holly, clematis, forget-me-not and lavender.

Common Health Problems



There are no vaccinations that they are supposed to have, and they are less attractive to flies, fleas and mites.

Dental Problems – Chinchillas teeth will continue to grow throughout their lives, overgrown teeth can be the cause of potentially fatal health problems. A good diet, along with a supply of wooden/stone chew objects can help to gnaw the teeth down. Hay is good at keeping the back teeth down as they chew sideways to eat it.

Excessive drooling and loss of appetite are sure signs of dental problems, vet should be seen immediately.

Respiratory Problems – Wheezing or chest difficulties may be a sign of a chest infection or pneumonia. A runny nose is linked to the common cold. Ear discharges or imbalance may mean an ear infection. Chinchillas are also sensitive to draughts and damp which can lead to colds.

Constipation – There will be fewer droppings than usual, and they may become bloated. Usually caused by stress, pain or lack of fibre and water – lots of hay and water is the answer.

Diarrhoea – Quite a common problem; usually a sign of overeating, especially with treats or vegetables. Avoid feeding any treats if they have diarrhoea.

Bumblefoot – This condition, also known as ulcerative pododermatitis, can be identified by ulcers on the feet and can be very painful if they get infected. Make regular checks to make sure the feet are not flaky or cracked. Plenty of wooden shelves and resting logs should be provided if a wire cage is used to rest the feet.

Health Check



Regular health checks are a good way to bond with your Chinchilla and get to know their natural condition and personality, making it easier to spot when something is wrong. It is a good idea to keep a track of their weight. Check their teeth, feet, ears, eyes and fur and visit the vet if any concerns