



CHINCHILLAS

The chinchilla (*C. laniger*) is a rodent originating from South America. Traditionally they have been raised for their pelts, which come in a number of colors. They may no longer exist in the wild and the current pet population descends largely from a small group of animals imported early in the last century. Their natural habitat is the high elevation, cool dry, rocky environment of the Andes Mountains. Chinchillas have large ears and hearing-associated structures and have been used in hearing research. Chinchillas are quiet, shy, intelligent animals. They are prey animals and will be frightened of “predator” smells, such as that of a dog or a ferret. They are mostly active in the evening and at night. Chinchillas should be carried with the body supported in one hand and the other hand grasping the tail at the base. When startled, chinchillas can shed areas of fur. This is known as “fur slip”.

Chinchillas are masters of hiding signs of disease and in addition to close, daily observation of your pet’s habits, an annual examination with a veterinarian who is familiar with chinchillas is recommended. By the time disease is obvious, the condition is usually well advanced.

HOUSING

Large, multi-level cages are best. Chinchillas are agile and active. They need to exercise and like to jump. Commercial wire cages are often suitable, but homemade cages can work well. Ventilation must be excellent, as chinchillas do poorly in humid conditions. Wire should be non-toxic (that is free of zinc or lead). The gauge of the wire should not allow small feet to slip through and to become trapped. Wire edges should not be rough or sharp. Some part of the floor should be solid. Hiding places should be provided. These can include PVC pipes, wooden or cardboard boxes. The cage should be secure against the escape of the chinchilla, and should not allow the entry of other animals. The cage should not be in direct sunlight, as chinchillas do best in cool temperatures. Temperatures of 10-18 C (50-65° F) and not above 50% humidity are recommended. Chinchillas are susceptible to heat stroke.

Straw and hay make good bedding, as can newspaper. Corn cob and cedar shavings are not recommended. Pine shavings, if in a tray under the cage may be used to absorb urine or feces. Bedding should not be dusty. Chinchillas can be housed in pairs or groups. Males can be neutered to prevent breeding. Chinchillas need mental stimulation and should be provided with toys and things to chew. Nontoxic, untreated branches, boxes and wooden cage furniture can be offered.

DUST BATHS

Dust baths should be offered daily for 30 minutes to an hour. Dust is commercially available and should be removed from the cage after bathing, to avoid soiling and overuse by the chinchilla.



DIET

Commercial pellets are available. One to two tablespoons of pellets daily are usually sufficient. Good quality grass hay should always be available. High roughage content in the diet is necessary for normal function of the chinchilla's digestive tract. Chinchillas need to spend a large part of their time eating a high fiber diet in order to maintain a healthy gut. Treats, including dried fruit, sunflower seeds, grains, oats, raisins and nuts are often high in fill or sugars and so can negatively affect gut function. Obesity is a common finding in pet chinchillas, so treats should be limited to, at most, a teaspoon per day. Changes to a chinchilla's diet should be made gradually, over 10-14 days. Clean, fresh water should always be available.

MEDICAL CONCERNS

Dental problems are common in chinchillas and may manifest as a change in eating habits, decrease in appetite, excessive salivation ("slobbers"), reluctance to chew or pawing at the mouth (pain) and weight loss.

Fur loss or matting may result from environmental conditions, ringworm, internal disease or stress. Eye or nose discharge, lack of energy or difficulty breathing is cause for concern. Diarrhea or a reduction in the size or number of fecal pellets can indicate serious disease. Seizures can result from toxin ingestion (eg. lead).

CHINCHILLA FACTS

- Gestation:** Averages 111 days.
- Litter:** Two is the usual litter size, although the range is one to six.
Young are precocious, and although they are not fully weaned until six to eight weeks of age, they will begin to take solid food by about one week.
- Life span:** Approximately 10 years, although they can live much longer.
- Sexual maturity:** Approximately eight months.