

## Chinchillas

### Chinchilla Facts

Life Span:	10 – 18 years
Environment Temperature Range:	60F - 75F
Body Temperature:	97F – 100F
Gestation Period:	111 days
Litter Size:	1 – 5 (range) 2 (average)
Weaning Age:	6-8 weeks

### Diet and Handling

The chinchilla is a rodent which is closely related to the guinea pig and porcupine. The pet chinchilla's wild counterpart inhabits the Andes Mountain areas of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. In the wild state, they live at high altitudes in rocky, barren mountainous regions.

*Chinchilla laniger* is the main species bred today. They tend to be fairly clean, odorless, and friendly pets, but usually are shy and easily frightened. They do not make very good pets for young children, since they tend to be high strung and hyperactive (both the child and the pet). The fur is extremely soft and beautiful bluish grey. Current color mutations include white, silver, beige, and black.

#### Diet

Commercial chinchilla pellets are available, but they are not available through all pet shops and feed stores. When the chinchilla variety is not in stock, a standard rabbit or guinea pig pellet can be fed in its place. Chinchillas tend to eat with their hands and often throw out a lot of pellets, thus causing wastage. A pelleted formulation should constitute the majority of the animal's diet.

Timothy, or other grass hay, should be fed to chinchillas in addition to their pellets. Alfalfa hay is not recommended due to its high calcium content relative to phosphorus. Hay is a beneficial supplement to the diet for nutritional and psychological reasons. Grass hay adds additional fiber to the diet, while serving as an item for the pet to chew on other than its fur. All hay should be free from mold and vermin contamination.

Dried fruit and nuts are excellent treats for the pet chinchilla. Raisins tend to be a favorite treat among these animals. Fresh carrot and green leafy vegetables can also be provided.

Chinchillas can drink water from valve waterers or sipper-type bottles.

#### Handling

Chinchillas are easy to handle and rarely bite. Be careful when handling them, however, due to the risk of "fur slip". Fur slip is the patchy shedding of hair that occurs when the fur is grasped or roughly handled. To avoid this condition, always grasp the base of the tail (close to the body) with one hand while supporting the body on your opposite forearm and against your body. Although they rarely bite, they still are capable if agitated enough. Also, they may urinate when annoyed.

## Housing and Breeding

### Housing

Chinchillas must be kept in an area that is well lit, adequately ventilated and kept cool and dry. They do not tolerate heat or humidity and they thrive at lower temperatures. The optimal temperature is 60F to 70F.

Wire mesh cages are typically used for chinchillas, with or without a solid floor. Glass aquariums or plastic containers can be used, but with caution due to their poor ventilation. If these containers are used, watch for the development of scruffy fur as an indication of impending problems. Wooden cages should not be used since chinchillas are noted gnawers. These animals tend to be very active and acrobatic, thus requiring a lot of space. An ideal enclosure would measure at least 6ft x 6ft x 3ft with a one foot square nest box.

Dust baths should be provided at least once or twice weekly. These must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchillas to roll around. Finely powdered volcanic ash is used to keep the fur clean and well groomed. Several brands of "chinchilla dust" are marketed. This bath should only be provided for a short time during the day, otherwise there would be a perpetual dust cloud in the cage.

Chinchillas tend not to get along well when housed together, with the female being the more aggressive gender.

### Breeding

Chinchillas will breed throughout the year, with the main breeding season being between November and May. Estrous cycles vary from 30 to 50 days. Many female chinchillas have irregular cycles. The gestation period is 111 days on the average, with a range of 105-115 days. There are no obvious signs of impending parturition (giving birth). Most births, however, take place in the morning. Usually two babies are born, but litter size varies between one and five.

## Non-Infectious and Infectious Conditions

### Non-Infectious Conditions

#### Malocclusion/Slobbers

This condition is characterized by drooling of saliva onto the fur under the chin. Other signs include inappetance, sores in the mouth, and loss of fur under the chin. The underlying cause is overgrowth of the molars (cheek teeth). Mineral imbalances, as well as poor dental alignment, lead to overgrown and maloccluded teeth. Temporary treatment involves clipping of the affected teeth and proper mineral supplementation. Providing wood or mineral blocks for the chinchilla to chew may aid in prevention, but many cases have a genetic basis.

#### Fur Slip

As mentioned in the section on HANDLING, chinchillas often lose patches of fur when roughly handled. Another common cause is fighting among the chinchillas. This condition does not injure the pet, but is only cosmet.

#### Barbering/Fur Chewing

Barbering is the condition where a chinchilla chews on its own or another's fur resulting in a rough, moth-eaten appearing coat. Some of the underlying causes of this behavior include boredom, dirty fur, dietary imbalances, and hereditary factors. Providing the animals with chew toys often aids in decreasing the incidence of this behavior.

#### Heat Stroke

High temperatures and high humidity are not tolerated well by chinchillas. Most problems occur in situations where the cage is placed in direct sunlight and poorly ventilated. Affected animals will be lying on their sides and panting. They also feel hot to the touch because of elevated body temperature. Animals in high humidity will also exhibit unkempt, damp fur. Treatment involves misting or bathing them in cold water or applying rubbing alcohol

to their foot pads. Veterinary assistance should be sought immediately for further recommendations and treatment.

### **Infectious Diseases**

#### Enteritis (Intestinal Infection)

One of the most common disease conditions of chinchillas is enteritis, or infection of the digestive tract. In many cases, the exact cause may not be determined. Bacterial, viral, and protozoal agents have all been associated with the syndrome. Poor husbandry and management is often associated with an outbreak.

Clinical signs range from depression to death, with or without diarrhea. Other signs of illness include loss of appetite, partial paralysis, and painful abdomen. Examination of the feces through fecal flotation, direct smears and cultures may reveal the causative agent.

Veterinary care and treatment must be sought at the first sign of illness. Treatment of enteritis involves appropriate antibiotic therapy and supportive care. This disease is often fatal despite aggressive therapy due to the severity of the illness.

#### Pneumonia (Respiratory Infection)

Pneumonia is another common condition observed in chinchillas, which is caused by a number of disease agents. Damp, drafty housing often predisposes the pet to this condition. Clinical signs include discharge from the eyes and nose, loss of appetite, and rough hair coat. Death may result from this respiratory disease. Treatment involves supportive care and antibiotics.

#### Ringworm

*Trichophyton mentagrophytes* is the typical agent in chinchilla's with ringworm. It causes hair loss and scabby red lesions on the nose, feet and around the eyes. Treatment involves the use of topical medication as prescribed by your veterinarian.

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