

Chinchilla - Facts & Care Sheet

Chinchillas originated in the high mountain regions of South America where they adapted to the extremes of their environment by producing their luxuriant coat. Originally, they were bred in captivity for their pelts later becoming increasingly popular as a clean, odourless pet.

The chinchilla can be found in the wild from southern Peru (where they originated) and Bolivia, to southern Chile. Possessing the thickest fur coat of all mammals, which are considered to be highly prized, they have been hunted in South America almost to extinction. Now a protected species in many countries these amazing creatures have partly been saved from extinction due to the establishment of highly controversial fur farms.

Chinchillas have existed in the wild, on ranches and in zoos for many years; it is only recently however that chinchillas have been considered as pets. Nocturnal animals they become very active, jumping and climbing during the night, they can eventually become quite active during the day. These animals are not normally suitable pets for young children.

There are many variations in colour and chinchillas can be beige, black or white although grey is the more commonly seen colour.

Before you get your new chinchilla home and settled you are going to need a few essential items, in order to care for him or her properly. Cage, wooden litter, food, nest box, hay, hay rack, water bottle, bottle brush, heavy food dish, cuttlefish, chinchilla dust bath, chinchilla sand, disinfectant.

How I should be handled

Chinchillas feel more secure if the grip is firm and do not like being handled roughly. Hold the chinchilla facing you, close to your chest, with one hand over its back and one hand holding the base of the tail gently but firmly. Gradually as your chinchilla becomes used to being picked up and lightly stroked they will gain confidence. If they are too lively at first just allow the animal to familiarise itself with you by introducing your hand into the cage for it to become accustomed to until it realises there is no threat. Chinchillas generally do not bite.

What kind of home do I need?

Chinchillas, part of the rodent family of animals, love to chew everything; it is therefore essential that their cage is made of wire mesh to ensure that it is escape proof. They can be very active and therefore need a lot of space to exercise. This requires a large cage that should ideally have several levels with a large enclosed nesting box and some bedding inside. Branches or cuttlebone should also be made available so chinchillas can gnaw to wear down their teeth. The bottom of the cage should have a mesh floor set above a tray that can be filled with wood based cat litter. The cage must be placed somewhere which does not get damp and is well away from draughts. Chinchillas can stand cold but suffer if the temperature rises above 20C.

Your Chinchilla should have access to a dust bath filled with Chinchilla sand which should be placed in the cage so that the animal can use it as required. If your chinchilla overdusts itself, or you find the bath is being used as a toilet then remove the bath and simply put it back into the cage every other day for 20 minutes or so. Cages and all equipment should be cleaned and disinfected regularly, at least once per week



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IFeed me, Feed me!

Chinchillas need a very bland diet of good quality pellets or mixed food such as Charlie Chinchilla and long cut hay for fibre. Their teeth are always growing, so like many rodents they need plenty of chews. 60g of good quality chinchilla food should be provided fresh each day. This should be augmented with a supply of fresh hay and water. Chinchillas have a delicate digestive system and their diet should be as dry as possible. Treats should be given sparingly. Breakfast cereals, dried fruit and toast make ideal occasional treats. Do not feed Muesli mixes, sunflower seeds, peanuts or flaked maize. If the feeding bowl is not secured to the cage it should be made of heavy earthenware to prevent spills.

Supplements

Although many foods are referred to as 'complete' none can compensate for a fresh supply of hay everyday. Hay fulfils many essential functions for your chinchilla: Is an essential fibre source helping to aid digestion. It can help prevent any problems with their teeth, as with many rodents their teeth continuously grow, regularly chewing hay helps with this. Boredom is prevented by supplying something for them to chew on and thus stress is minimised. Ideal chews are twigs or wood loops or pieces of cuttlebone. Fresh foods such as a small piece of apple or a couple of raisins can be an ideal treat for your chinchilla or try a small piece of apple or mango.

Chinchilla Health Care

Like the majority of small animals Chinchillas teeth continuously grow, which can lead to serious problems. Branches or cuttlebone should be made available so chinchillas can gnaw to wear down their teeth.

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Chinchillas have the second densest fur in the animal kingdom, only sea otters have fur that is denser. In the wild to remove the grease and dirt from their fur chinchillas roll in volcanic dust, so in captivity we need to provide them with an alternative. They like to have a bath in special chinchilla sand after they have been handled to help remove the grease that our hands put on their fur. It is important to provide them with a sand bath every few days to keep their fur looking in tip top condition.

It is important to regularly check your chinchilla over and look out for any signs such as weight loss, bare patches (chinchillas can chew their fur if they become stressed, bored or have a bad diet) and most commonly overgrown teeth.

Socialising & Training

Remember that even with the best will in the world you won't be there for your chinchilla to the degree that it can count you as adequate as its only companion. Chinchillas are sociable creatures and love nothing better than to snuggle up with a mate. This does not mean that there can't be room for you in their lives too, rather it means that you must not be selfish and should put the chinchillas long term welfare first. If you value the animals right to display more natural behaviours then you should get two chinchillas. You can have two females, two males or one male and one female, but ideally they should be the same age bought at the same time. If you don't know the history of the animals then you should get the male neutered and the female spayed. If you have two males together you must be aware that bringing females into the area may encourage them to fight. As when the female is in season she puts out pheromones that the males can smell which can cause them to be very territorial and fight.

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Chinchillas are nocturnal and therefore most active in the earlier part of the evening. Naturally timid they do not like being handled roughly, they will shed their coat if they are stressed or held tightly. Gentle contact and winning their confidence will eventually result in them sitting on your open hand or allowing light stroking.

Playing

It is recommended that you let them have a run around on a daily basis, chinchillas are highly intelligent animals and love to play. You must however supervise play at ALL times and be sure to remove any wires or other items that could cause harm. Make sure the room is escape proof and doesn't allow them any access to bathrooms.

Chinchillas should be provided with a number of toys in their cage for entertainment, especially toys for chewing. This is an essential item in their cage to ensure their teeth do not over grow.

