

Chinchilla

Are you considering a Chinchilla as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Chinchillas are high maintenance pets. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$500-700 each year for a single, healthy chinchilla. The average lifespan for a chinchilla is 13-25 years. Chinchillas need the opportunity to socialize and exercise outside of their cage for a minimum of 15 minutes every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance. Follow these guidelines for basic chinchilla husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



Basic Care

Housing

The minimum recommended cage size is 36" L x 24" W x 36" H which provides room for running, leaping to multiple levels, foraging, hiding, a dust bath, and possibly a litter box. Cage bottoms and levels should be solid rather than wire to prevent painful foot ulcers. To keep your chinchilla engaged and happy, provide environmental enrichments, such as an exercise wheel, tunnels, wood and willow chew toys, cardboard boxes (free of staples) with entry and exit holes, brown paper bags, toilet paper rolls, untreated wicker balls and untreated apple branches.

Temperature

Chinchillas are highly prone to heatstroke in temperatures over 25 degrees Celsius, and this is one of the most common causes of accidental death of pet chinchillas. Chinchilla owners must have air conditioning to keep chinchillas cool during warmer months. They should have a thermometer in the room in which the chinchilla is kept to monitor temperature at all times to ensure the chinchilla stays cool and safe. The ideal temperature range for a chinchilla is 15-18 degrees Celsius, so a cooler area of the home is the best place to house a chinchilla. They should never be kept near heat sources such as radiators or in direct sunlight.

Bedding & Litter

It is best to use fleece, towels, or blankets (with no loose threads). You can also use aspen wood shavings, recycled newspaper beddings, wood stove pellets, or hemp bedding. Never use pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter, as these products are toxic to chinchillas.

Food & Water

Chinchillas' teeth are constantly growing and are kept trimmed by chewing hay, so always provide unlimited amounts of hay. They also produce two types of droppings, one of which are not actually feces and are reingested in order to absorb important nutrients. Chinchillas are herbivores. A healthy diet consists of:

- Hay: unlimited amounts of grass-based hay. Timothy hay, Brome hay, and Meadow Grass are all appropriate. Hay should make up the majority of their diet.
- Pellets: 2-3 Tbsp per day. Avoid pellet/seed mixes, as these are not easily digested or healthy.
- Leafy green vegetables such as dark green and red lettuces can be fed in small amounts, 2-4 Tbsp per day
- Treats: Foods high in sugar and fat should be avoided. Raisins and small pieces of fruits can be useful in training, but provide only very small amounts. Consult your veterinarian to see what is best for your chinchilla.
- Toxic foods: Most household plants are toxic to chinchillas. Avoid food made for humans and commercial treats as they can upset their sensitive digestive systems.

Water: Use a bowl and provide fresh water daily.

Litter Training

If started at a young age, chinchillas can be successfully litter trained. Start by putting a litter box in the corner of the chinchilla's cage that he/she is naturally using as a toilet. Provide a different type of bedding in the litter box from the rest of the cage to help your chinchilla differentiate the litter area.

Grooming

Chinchillas should never get wet as this is extremely hazardous for their fur and health. Chinchillas clean themselves well with dust baths. A bath area and dust can be purchased at most pet stores. Dust baths should only be provided for a few hours at a time and never overnight to reduce inhalation of dust.

House-proofing

Chinchillas do not have the ability to throw up, so anything they ingest must pass through their entire system. Be sure to provide your chinchilla with safe food and toys and keep them away from potential hazards such as wires and cords.

Allergies?

If you or a member of your household suffers from seasonal allergies, you might be allergic to the food or bedding chinchillas use. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products prior to adopting.

Health Care

Veterinary Care

Veterinary costs can be more expensive than that of cats and dogs because chinchillas are considered an exotic species and must be treated by a qualified exotics veterinarian. While chinchillas do not require vaccinations, they should see the vet yearly for a check-up or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to Adopting: Find a chinchilla-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their prices for check-ups and other common procedures.

Common Medical Concerns

Since chinchillas are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses to avoid being left behind by their group. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. Common symptoms include but are not limited to diarrhea, lack of appetite, infrequent stools, change in coat, head tilt, and lumps. Chinchillas' teeth grow continuously and can become misaligned or overgrown if not provided with sufficient chewing materials (hay, wood). They are also prone to heatstroke from high temperatures and exposure to direct sunlight, as well as hypothermia if they get wet.

Chinchilla Behaviour

Psychology

Since chinchillas are prey animals, they are at the bottom of the food chain: everything can eat them and, they are never safe. This dramatically shapes the way they see the world. Chinchillas need to feel safe and secure, have spots for hiding, and are most comfortable with all 4 feet planted safely on the ground.

Bonding with your Chinchilla

Be gentle when interacting with your pet chinchilla: they are extremely delicate animals and can suffer from broken bones or painful fur slips if mishandled. Respect their boundaries: chinchillas are not truly domesticated animals, and most dislike handling. They will not seek out interactions with humans in the way cats, dogs, rabbits, and other species might. Chinchillas are social, active, and intensely curious. The most important thing to do to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with him/her every day and provide plenty of environmental enrichments inside and outside the cage. They are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk, so find a time they are naturally active to socialize with them. Like with people, chinchillas' personalities can vary; some can be shy or outgoing, sweet or grumpy, placid or playful. Get to know your chinchilla's personality and treat it accordingly: for instance, shy chinchillas will need more socialization and patience in order to feel comfortable around people.

One or Two?

Chinchillas are naturally social animals and can form very strong bonds with each other, so housing two together is strongly encouraged. Once bonds are formed, they should not be broken. If you would like to

try to bond two unfamiliar chinchillas, consult one of the many resources available first. Bonding unfamiliar chinchillas can be tricky and must be approached with caution.

Handling

Chinchillas are delicate and can be squirmy and difficult to handle. When picking them up, use both hands to secure them. Dropping a chinchilla or mishandling it in any way can cause serious injury, so if a chinchilla is struggling, put it down.

Origins

Chinchillas are native to the Andes mountain region. They live in burrows in large herds. They have been used for the fur trade since the 16th century. Of the three wild species of chinchilla, only 2 remain due to over-hunting. Although it is now illegal to hunt wild chinchillas, they remain highly endangered due to the continuation of this practice. Chinchillas were first domesticated for fur farms in the 1920s, but it was not until later in the century that people started keeping them as pets.

Understanding Chinchilla Vocalizations

- **Coo:** A sign of happiness. It is also a vocalization towards other chinchillas.
- **Bark:** Upset or scared.
- **Cry:** Indicates pain.
- **Chattering (vigorous):** Feels threatened or is in pain.
- **Chattering (gentle):** Contentment