



7826 NE Sandy Blvd., Portland, OR 97213-6467 P. 971-361-2209 F. 971-361-4359
www.avianexoticvetcare.com

Chinchillas

Housing

Chinchillas usually are housed in galvanized steel mesh cages. These work best because glass or plastic terraria often get too hot and do not allow adequate ventilation. Wooden cages are a poor choice because chinchillas love to chew and can chew through their enclosure. The floor of their cage should be solid to ensure that the chinchillas do not incur leg or footpad injuries by slipping through the mesh. If it is not possible to find solid flooring, the mesh on the bottom of the cage should not exceed $\frac{1}{2}$ " by $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Chinchillas also love to jump around their enclosure. Platforms should be provided because they are a source of enrichment. They should be placed to avoid food and water contamination from defecation while the chinchilla is on the platform. Chinchillas also love to have small houses to hide in. Small wooden houses often not only provide shelter, but also give the chinchillas something to chew on. Paper-based bedding is recommended.

Temperature

Chinchillas are rodents native to the Andes Mountains of Chile and therefore are accustomed to the cooler temperatures of high altitudes. With their dense fur coats, chinchillas do not tolerate high temperature or humidity well. Ideally, their cage should be placed in a cool, dry area with adequate ventilation. The ideal temperature should be kept between 60°F and 75°F, and humidity should be kept at less than 60% relative. As a general rule, temperature + humidity should not exceed 150. Above these temperatures and humidity, chinchillas are prone to developing heatstroke.

Diet

- Chinchilla pellets are commercially available and are recommended. If you are unable to obtain chinchilla pellets, a standard rabbit or guinea pig pellet can be substituted but is not ideal. Chinchillas also require a dietary fiber that can be provided by Timothy hay. In general, alfalfa hay is considered a treat and should not be the main source of roughage because of its high calcium content. Excessive alfalfa hay consumption may lead to urinary issues. Chinchilla pellets and Timothy hay should provide a balanced diet for your chinchilla.
- Treats should compromise no more than 10% of the diet. Treats include fresh fruits and vegetables. Fresh carrots, green vegetables, and raisins can be used for treats but should be given in moderation to avoid obesity and/or diarrhea in your chinchilla.
- Chinchillas need plenty of fresh water. They can learn to drink from a sipper bottle. The water must be changed daily.

Handling

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Chinchillas are easily restrained but must be handled with care. If frightened or stressed, they may bite or suffer from "fur-slip." Fur-slip occurs when the chinchilla releases a portion of its fur and has patchy shedding. This can happen as the result of stress or rough handling. You should never hold your chinchilla so that it is dangling. Once picked up, you should immediately place a hand under the chinchilla's body to support it. A towel or a washcloth can be used to help support your chinchilla.

Behavior

- Chinchillas are a social species. They thrive in pairs, so you should plan to have two.
- Chinchillas are nocturnal animals; therefore, a quiet area of the house is best for them during the day.
- Chinchillas need to take sand baths several times a week. This activity helps the chinchilla to remove oil and dirt from its hair coat, and you will find that your pet also really enjoys it. A variety of chinchilla dusts are available commercially. The dust bath should be provided for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. The bath then should be removed from the cage because excessive use may lead to eye irritation, especially in young animals.

Lifespan

Chinchillas can live up to 20 years.

Common Medical Conditions

- *Dental malocclusion.* Chinchilla teeth grow continuously throughout the life of the chinchilla. Malocclusion occurs when the teeth, particularly the molars, wear unevenly, creating points that can lacerate the tongue. Signs of dental malocclusion include excessive drooling, weight loss, and decreased fecal output. Encouraging hay consumption may help prevent this problem, but there is frequently a genetic basis. Malocclusion can be remedied with teeth trimming; this requires general anesthesia.
- *Heatstroke.* Chinchillas do not tolerate high temperatures or humidity levels. If kept in conditions that are too warm or that have poor ventilation, a chinchilla's hair coat will become unkempt, and the fur may be damp. Signs of heatstroke include extreme lethargy, panting, and bright red mucous membranes (e.g., gums). This is a very serious condition, and veterinary attention should be sought immediately.
- *Fur chewing.* This condition has been associated with hereditary factors, dietary imbalance, and boredom. A proper diet along with wooden toys or other enrichment activities may help reduce the incidence of this problem.
- *Fur ring.* This condition occurs in males when a ring of shed fur becomes stuck around the penis and constricts it. If left untreated, it may become life threatening. Signs include excessive grooming of the area and straining to urinate.
- *Diarrhea.* The most common cause is inappropriate diet. Overconsumption of treats and fresh green vegetables can lead to diarrhea. Bacterial and parasitic infections also cause diarrhea.
- *Respiratory disease.* This is a common problem in pet chinchillas. An increased respiratory rate or mucus accumulation on the nostrils or forearms may indicate an infection. Seek veterinary care.

AUTHOR: Jeanne C. Larson

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