

NUTRITION: THE KEY TO YOUR CHINCHILLA'S HEALTH

Your chinchilla's diet plays a key role in maintaining optimal condition. A healthy diet prevents two common health problems: dental disease and gastrointestinal problems. Specifically, your chinchilla requires a high-fiber, low-fat diet consisting primarily of grass hay and a small portion of pellets formulated specifically for chinchillas.

Our Recommendations for a Healthy Chinchilla Diet:

- Fresh, good-quality grass hay should be available at all times. This should provide at least 80% of the diet. Types of grass hay include:
 - Western Timothy
 - Orchard grass
 - Oat grass
 - Brome
- Hay-based pellets specifically formulated for chinchillas, about 2 tbsp per day, unless your veterinarian specifies feeding more. Avoid mixes that contain dried fruits and nuts, which should be used as occasional treats only. Pellets should contain 15%-20% bulk fiber, 16%-20% protein, and 2%-4% fat. Don't be tempted to substitute rabbit or guinea pig pellets – chinchillas hold food in their front paws, so they need pellets long enough to grip them while eating.



Varying the types of hay offered can create added interest but continue to feed the same amount of food every day. This will allow you notice any change in appetite right away. Careful observation of the amount of food eaten is especially important because chinchillas eat mainly at night – you may not see your chinchilla eat very often.

NOTE: Make any dietary changes gradually, so your pet's system has time to adjust.

Be sure your chinchilla also has access to fresh, clean water at all times. Chinchillas generally seem to prefer heavy, water bowls, as opposed to ball-tipped water bottles. A salt or mineral stone is not needed.

What Foods do Chinchillas Eat in the Wild?

Chinchillas originate from cool, arid regions high in the Andes mountains of South America, where the land is rocky and relatively barren. They evolved to thrive on any vegetation they can find, mostly dry grass, bushes, leaves, and twigs. In addition to the dry staples of their diet, chinchillas in the wild also seek out tastier morsels, such as berries, herbs, and cactus fruit. In other words, chinchillas are selective feeders. When pet chinchillas are given the option, they will normally eat what tastes good first, which can lead to obesity, diarrhea, gastrointestinal problems, and dental disease.

Why a High-Fiber Diet is Essential to Your Chinchilla's Health

The roughage that makes up the bulk of the chinchilla's natural diet requires a large volume of food and prolonged chewing to extract sufficient nutrients. Therefore chinchilla teeth have evolved to grow continuously, as they are constantly ground down by this chewing action.

A high proportion of fiber in the diet also ensures normal gastrointestinal (GI) motility, which is just a way of saying food moves promptly through the GI tract, being digested normally along the way.

If the dietary fiber levels fall and the GI tract slows down, several disruptive changes can occur leading to GI stasis (when food stops moving through the GI tract), constipation, or diarrhea.

Low dietary fiber can also contribute to improper wearing of the teeth, resulting in sharp points on the chinchilla's cheek teeth that can cause painful ulcers in the mouth and/or tongue.

If your pet stops eating or begins eating less, or if you notice a change in the number or size of your pet's fecal droppings, contact your veterinarian immediately as these could be signs of dental or gastrointestinal disease.

To Green, or Not to Green...

Whether to feed fresh greens and vegetables is somewhat controversial, with some experts pointing out that they are not part of a wild chinchilla's diet and may contribute to gastrointestinal upset and an imbalance of certain mineral nutrients. If you choose to feed fresh greens or vegetables as treats, they should be in very limited quantity and be low in calcium content. Some good options include:

- Basil
- Romaine lettuce
- Red leaf lettuce
- Green leaf lettuce
- Cilantro
- Radicchio
- Swiss chard

References



Photos courtesy Audrey Koepf

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