

CHINCHILLAS

The long-tailed chinchilla (*Chinchilla laniger*) is native to the mountains and foothills of the Andes in South America. These rodents are known for their large ears and soft, luxurious fur. Chinchilla fur has the highest density of any land animal with more than 20,000 hairs per square centimeter. Many mammals grow just one hair from each follicle, but the chinchilla has more than 50 hairs in a single follicle. The international trade in chinchilla fur goes back to the 1500s and by the end of the 19th century; chinchillas had already become quite rare. Today, the free-ranging chinchilla is listed as endangered because of hunting and trapping for its pelt. Chinchillas are currently captive bred for both the pet industry and the fur trade.

Chinchillas make charming pets, but they are naturally skittish. Chinchillas are not considered to be good pets for small children because of their delicate bones and high-strung, hyperactive natures. Most pet chinchillas live 6-10 years. Female chinchillas tend to be larger than males, and the average body weight generally ranges from 400-600 grams (0.9-1.3 lbs).

Diet

Chinchillas are herbivores and they require a diet high in fiber.

- Provide unlimited access to fresh grass hays, such as timothy and brome, and oat hay. Alfalfa hay is very rich in calcium and protein and should be fed to young, growing animals.
- A high-quality chinchilla pellet should make up 30-50% of the diet. This ration should contain 16-20% protein, 2% to 5% fat, and 20-35% fiber. Guinea pig or rabbit pellets will also suffice, however they are shorter and not as easy for chinchillas to hold.
- Treats, such as fresh carrots and green vegetables, should never make up more than 5-10% of the diet.

Make clean, fresh water available at all times. Water is easily provided in water bottles placed at a level your chinchilla can reach comfortably. Rinse water bottles daily and clean bottles regularly.

Housing

These active, acrobatic animals require a lot of space. A large multi-level cage is recommended since chinchillas like to climb and jump in both horizontal and vertical directions. Provide a cage with minimal dimensions of 80 in × 50 in × 80 in (length x depth x height).

- Select a cage constructed of a very small welded wire mesh to prevent leg or foot injury. An area of solid flooring should also be available, as well as drop pans below the cage to facilitate cleaning.
- Since chinchillas are shy animals, they also require a hiding place. Use something that is made of non-porous materials that can be cleaned and sanitized well or an item that can be easily replaced like a cardboard box.

In the wild, chinchillas are solitary creatures. If enough space is provided, pet chinchillas of the same sex may live peacefully together in a single cage, or a male can usually be housed with one or more females. Male chinchillas will fight each other for a mate, and two females may also fight.

Place the cage in a well-lit, adequately ventilated environment that is cool and dry. Chinchillas thrive at a temperature range of 18-22°C (64-72°F). Chinchillas do not tolerate heat or humidity. These nocturnal rodents cannot sweat, and they are prone to potentially fatal overheating. Chinchillas should generally be kept in an air-conditioned space in climates when temperatures exceed 26°C (80°F).

- Provide wooden blocks and clean, dry, cardboard rolls for chewing.
- Tree branches make good chinchilla toys as well, but choose non-toxic wood like mulberry or pear tree.
- Avoid toxic branches from cedar, cherry, or citrus trees.
- Chinchillas enjoy ledges, boxes, sticks, and other perches.
- Select exercise wheels with safety in mind. Wheels should be at least 38 cm (15 in) in diameter. Smaller wheels can hurt the chinchillas' backs. Select a solid running surface to prevent limbs or toes from being caught. Also avoid wheels with support bars (bars going from top to bottom on the wheel), as these can cause serious injury.

Dust bathing

Chinchillas must regularly dust bathe to remove oil and moisture from their thick fur. Provide dust baths at least once or twice weekly for only a short time to prevent a perpetual dust cloud in the cage. Dust baths must be large enough and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll around in the pan.

Exercise

Any chinchilla let out of its cage for play and exercise should be fairly tame and used to being handled. Close supervision is required. Chinchillas are curious, and many things are investigated by biting into them to see if they are edible. Supervise your pet closely in a room that has been checked carefully beforehand. Potential dangers to watch for include:

- Electrical cords pose a grave danger and should be shielded or kept out of reach.
- Buckets of water, toilet, filled bathtubs, or sinks (drowning hazard)
- Heaters (turn off or block access to prevent burns)
- Ash trays (risk of tobacco/nicotine poisoning)
- Doors (keep closed to prevent the chinchilla from getting trapped, pinched, or escaping)
- Plastic bags, light plastic objects that could be chewed and ingested
- Other pets (with a few exceptions, other pets should be removed from the room when the chinchilla is free)

Handling/Behavior

If handled frequently at a young age, chinchillas adapt well to humans. Restrain your chinchilla by gently grasping the base of the tail (close to the body) with one hand, while supporting the entire body on the opposite forearm and against your body. Chinchillas may also be held around the chest in one hand and around the tail base in the other hand.

Take care when handling your chinchilla. Chinchillas may try to jump and run when afraid, and they are very agile and fast. Be gentle when handling your chinchilla because of the risk of “fur slip” or the patchy shedding of hair that occurs when the fur is grasped or roughly handled.

Chinchillas rarely bite though they are capable of doing so if they become agitated enough. Ingestion of feces is also a normal chinchilla behavior. Chinchillas produce cecotropes or “night feces” which are loaded with plenty of vitamins and other nutrients.