

Caring for Chinchillas

A chinchilla can be a delightful pet for the right owner. Chinchillas have delicate skeletons and love to chew on things like electrical cords, so a safe environment is essential. Keep your chinchilla's health on the right track with a healthy diet, lots of safe exercise, and regular veterinary care.

Biological Facts

- Long-tailed chinchilla: *Chinchilla lanigera*
- Native to the Andes mountain ranges of northern Chile; live in rock crevices and holes on relatively barren slopes
- Life span: 10 to 15 years
- Adult weight: 14 to 28 oz (400 to 800 g); females are larger than males
- Very delicate bone structure; not an ideal pet for small children
- Sexual maturity: 7 to 10 months
- Gestation: 105 to 115 days

Behavior

- Primarily active at night, dawn, and early evening
- Fast, agile, active; good at climbing and jumping
- Females are dominant and more aggressive than males
- Difficult to litter train
- Very clean; virtually odorless
- Highly social; should be housed in pairs or small groups when possible
- Rarely bite; enjoy being petted, but may resist cuddling
- They chew everything; the chinchilla's environment must be "chinchilla proof" to prevent injuries and escape

Diet

- Must be high in fiber, low in carbohydrate, and low in sugar to prevent dental disease and digestive problems
- No breads, cereals, or nuts should be fed

- Feed free-choice quality grass hay, such as timothy, brome, and Bermuda grass
- Feed 1 to 2 tablespoons of commercial chinchilla pellets daily
- Feed small amounts of alfalfa or clover hay, dried fruit, and fresh vegetables as treats; feed treats sparingly to prevent obesity
- Diet changes must be gradual to prevent stomach upset
- Provide fresh water daily

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Environment

- Provide a large, multilevel cage with shelves for perching, plenty of room for running, and a cage floor of welded mesh wire with smooth areas for resting the feet
- Place the cage in a quiet location
- Maintain a humidity level of 40% or lower and a temperature of 50°F to 75°F (10°C to 24°C); temperatures higher than 80°F can be fatal
- Provide a nest box (one for each chinchilla) for sleeping and for shelter from aggressive cage mates
- Provide wooden cage furniture, chew sticks, and pumice stones for chewing to help keep teeth healthy
- Provide an exercise wheel with a smooth running surface to prevent injuries to legs/feet

Preventive Care

- A complete physical examination is required every 6 to 12 months
- An annual fecal examination is necessary to check for internal parasites

Caring for Your New Pet

- Examine males monthly for penile hair rings
- Allow regular, supervised exercise in a chinchilla-proof enclosure to prevent obesity
- Allow a 10- to 15-minute dust bath at least twice weekly

Common Medical Disorders

- Dental disease
- Drooling
- Problems eating
- Eye irritation
- Conjunctivitis
- Fur/skin disorders: ringworm (fungus), fur chewing, loss of fur
- Gastrointestinal disorders (diarrhea, bloat, stasis)
- Hair ring accumulation in males (a constricting injury to the penis)
- Heat stress
- Respiratory infection
- Trauma