

# Chinchillas as Pets

**History and Biology:** Chinchillas originated in South America. They have energetic, lively and curious personalities. Due to the demand for their pelts, chinchillas almost went extinct in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Today, wild chinchillas are thought to be nearly extinct, with only one short-tailed species possibly remaining.

Chinchillas are very agile rodents who are built for leaping and sailing through the air. In their natural habitat, chinchillas are active at night, but in captivity they can adapt their routine to be more active during the day.

A chinchilla's average life span in captivity is 10 years, though longer life spans are routinely seen. Chinchillas are not recommended as a child's first pet as they are easily frightened, jump and move quickly.

## Anatomy and Physiology:

- Like rabbits and guinea pigs, chinchillas have a cecum, which is a large, thin-walled organ connected to the small intestine and colon. The cecum houses bacteria and protozoa that help digest food material, although the chinchilla's cecum holds less than that of a rabbit or guinea pig.
- All of a chinchilla's teeth grow continuously. The main way the teeth are kept at their proper length, is through feeding hay, which forces the cheek teeth to grind/occlude against each other. Wood chews are not safe and should not be used.

## Housing:

- Cage size should be spacious as healthy chinchillas are very active. A good cage size is 6.5 foot x 6.5 foot by 3.5 foot. Wire is recommended over wood, as chinchillas will likely try to chew on the cage. As chinchillas are shy, they need a hiding area which can be a wooden nest box measuring 12 x 10 x 8 inches. PVC plumbing pipes can also be used and should measure at least 4-5 inches in diameter. Wheels and other safe enrichment toys should be provided as they are intelligent and curious animals. Safe toys include cardboard boxes, empty Kleenex boxes, thick PVC plumbing pipe and clean, clay flower pots.
- If a solid bottom cage is used, appropriate bedding should be used to help soak up urine and feces. Avoid pine, cedar or any clay-based bedding or litter. Hard wood shavings or paper are appropriate. Whatever is selected, be sure the bedding is as dust free as possible.
- If a wire bottom cage is used, a solid platform should be provided so pressure sores will not develop on the bottom of the feet.

- Chinchillas are not heat or humidity tolerant. Their ideal temperature range is 60 – 72 degrees F. Heat stroke may result in temperatures higher than 82 degrees F. Humidity below 50% promotes plush fur growth.
- Chinchillas require regular dust baths to keep their coat clean. Usually dust baths are provided twice a week for 4-5 minutes. Many commercial formulations are available. Dust is placed in a plastic pan that is big enough for the chinchilla to roll around in at a depth of one to two inches.

#### Diet:

- Clean, fresh water should always be available. Using a water bottle with a ball-valve is recommended. The bottles should be cleaned regularly. Brushes are available at most pet stores to clean water bottles.
- A high-quality chinchilla pellet should be fed. Seed mixes are not appropriate, and may cause gastrointestinal upset, obesity and other disease. A high quality grass or timothy hay should be available at all times. Leafy greens can account for up to 15 percent of the diet.
- If on a well-balanced diet, chinchillas do not need supplements or salt licks. These may cause an imbalance of certain minerals and nutrients which may lead to health problems.
- Because of their unique gastrointestinal anatomy, chinchillas are very sensitive to foods high in sugar. Fruit and other high sugar vegetables, such as baby carrots, bell pepper, tomatoes and corn should be severely restricted. Yogurt drops and seed treats are not appropriate. **If a chinchilla stops eating, even if it is only for 24 hours, this is a medical emergency, and he/she should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.**

#### Socialization and Behavior:

- Chinchillas can be housed in pairs if they are compatible. Introductions should be made slowly with close supervision.
- Generally, a frequently handled chinchilla will come out of his/her cage willingly. In situations where a chinchilla is nervous, warning nips may be given. Fur slip (hair loss) can occur when a chinchilla is handled roughly or inappropriately.

#### Veterinary Care:

- Finding a good veterinarian is recommended. Chinchillas should have routine physical exams every 6 months. Manifestation of a health condition is often rapid due to their fast metabolic rates, so early detection is important. Ideally, your chinchilla should have an exam after purchase or adoption, and every 6 months after his or her first exam.

