How to Keep Your Chinchilla Happy, Healthy and Safe

- Allow chinchillas to sleep in the daytime (they are crepuscular).
- Schedule a daily exercise/play time with direct contact of 30–60 minutes.
- NEVER use water to bathe a chinchilla; offer only dust baths (3–4 times a week).
- Supervise fully when the chinchilla is out of its enclosure.
- Offer a consistent diet to prevent gastrointestinal upset.
- Provide safe wood objects or branches for gnawing, as their teeth grow continuously throughout life.
- When restraint is necessary, do so gently to avoid fur "slip."
- Schedule regular veterinary visits, especially for dental checks.
- Proper housing should include:
  - Provide a cool and dry environment (optimal temperature is 50–68°F [10–20°C] with humidity less than 40%)
  - Provide space for a dust box (6 x 6 x 9 inches [15 x 15 x 23 cm])
  - Include a hiding box, such as a plastic igloo, PVC pipe or hay tunnel, for sleeping
  - Have multi-level platforms
  - Be as large as possible
  - Include suitable substrates, such as shredded paper (non-inked) or recycled newspaper. Avoid pine, cedar and corn cob for bedding.
- It is important to prevent chinchillas from accessing:
  - Electrical cords
  - Dogs, cats, ferrets and other potential predators
  - Direct sunlight
  - Temperatures higher than 72°F (22°C)
  - Water baths
  - Hay with mold, insects, insecticides or fecal contamination
  - Any treats
  - Unsupervised children

Common Disorders of Chinchillas

It is recommended that your chinchilla have an annual exam. However, if you notice your chinchilla exhibiting any of these signs or symptoms, please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

- **Behavioral**
  - Cage-mate aggression
  - Stress induced fur chewing
  - Self-mutilation
- **Cardiac**
  - Cardiomyopathy
  - Heart murmurs
- **Dental**
  - Improper wearing of cheek teeth
  - Malocclusion
  - Periapical abscesses
  - Dental caries
- **Dermatological**
  - Abscesses
  - Fungal infections
- **Gastrointestinal**
  - Bloat
  - Choke
  - Constipation
  - Diarrhea
- **Malnutrition**
- **Nervous System**
  - Convulsions
  - Heat stroke
- **Ocular**
  - Eye infections
- **Respiratory**
- **Reproductive**
  - Difficult birth
  - Penile fur rings
  - Uterine infection
- **Trauma**
  - Fractures
  - Wounds

Resources

- **Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians** (AEMV.com)
- **Lafeber Emeraid** (lafeber.com/vet/mammal-medicine)
- **Oxbow Animal Health** (oxbowanimalhealth.com)

Cover image: oksana2010/Shutterstock.com
Inside image: Eric Isselee/Shutterstock.com

EXOTICS COMPANION CARE SERIES

How to Care for Your

Chinchilla

ASSOCIATION OF EXOTIC MAMMAL VETERINARIANS

To learn more, visit the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians at **AEMV.com**

ABOUT YOUR CHINCHILLA

Free-ranging chinchillas live in crevices and burrows in the high grassy meadows of the South American Andes Mountains. They thrive in low temperature and low humidity environments.

The most common species in captivity is Chinchilla lanigera. Chinchillas are rodents and are related to guinea pigs. They are characterized by their large hind feet, chubby round bodies, soft dense fur, large eyes and ears, long whiskers and squirrel-like tails. Chinchilla fur is considered the softest in the world, with as many as 60–75 single hairs growing from one follicle. The fur is so dense that skin parasites, such as fleas, cannot live.

The original silver-gray color now shares popularity with color mutations, such as black, white, charcoal, beige and tan, silver, brown, champagne, violet and Siamese.

Chinchillas are **intelligent, engaging creatures** that quickly become bonded to their owners.

What to Expect from Your Chinchilla

Chinchillas are intelligent, engaging creatures that quickly become bonded to their owners. They are easy to care for and have little odor. Although chinchillas are crepuscular, they may acclimate to become active during the day. They are fast agile climbers and jumpers, and they tend to investigate everything— chewing up bits of paper, cardboard or any items of interest they encounter along the way.

Chinchillas typically urinate in their cage or a litter pan; however, they are difficult to litter-train with respect to their small, hard, dry fecal pellets, which are produced in abundance and have little odor. Chinchillas are coprophagic, which means they ingest fecal pellets; this is a normal behavior for many rodent species.

One peculiarity of chinchillas is their need to bathe in fine dust. Bath dust containing fine pumice is commercially available, and the chinchilla should be allowed to roll (bathe) in the dust at least 3–4 times per week. When chinchillas are stressed, they will chew their fur, a process referred to as "fur-barbering." Soft fecal pellets or diarrhea may also occur in a stressed chinchilla.

Is your chinchilla a male or female?

Male chinchillas do not have a true scrotum, and the testes are located in the abdominal cavity. The most common way to determine sex is by the anogenital distance: female chinchillas have a very short distance between their rectum and their urinary and reproductive opening, while males have a wider gap between their rectum and penis. Some females may be mistaken for males due to a large urethral opening.

Are chinchillas tame?

Chinchillas are generally one of the most affectionate rodents if properly acclimated. They rarely bite and prefer to be cuddled and carried. Only if they feel trapped or are restrained against their will, will they bite aggressively. However, a cornered or angry chinchilla will rear up on its hind legs and spray urine at the aggressor, accompanied by a distinct vocalization.

A chinchilla that is trying to escape may release clumps of fur (fur slip) from its body, leaving a large bald patch. The fur will grow back with time.

What should you feed your chinchilla?

A good quality Timothy-based pelleted diet formulated for chinchillas and an unlimited variety of quality grass hays provides an adequate diet for adult chinchillas. Only young, pregnant, or lactating chinchillas should consume alfalfa-based products. Treats should be avoided to prevent obesity. Chinchillas consume almost 70% of their food in the evening hours. A water bottle with a sipper tube is the best way to provide a clean, plentiful supply of water; it should be replenished daily.

Where should you house your chinchilla?

Chinchillas are very active and are able to leap 3 feet (91 cm) straight up in the air. The larger the enclosure, the better: one that is 3 x 2 x 2 feet (1.0 x 0.6 x 0.6 m) is a good starter home. Welded wire mesh with very small openings is acceptable with solid flooring; avoid wire flooring. The enclosure must be free of sharp edges to avoid injury. Multiple level platforms should be provided in the enclosure for jumping and climbing. Items, such as untreated, nontoxic wood and pesticide-free tree branches, must be provided for the chinchilla to chew. Cardboard paper towel tubes may be provided for enrichment.