

## How to care for your Chinchilla

Before bringing your chinchilla home:

- ensure you have a cage set up ready,
- be sure that your family are aware your new pet will need peace and quiet to settle into their new home.
- ensure your chinchilla is not unduly disturbed by other pets such as cats and dogs.
- Ensure that any younger children understand a small animals nervousness, and that they will need to be gentle and patient

### Setting up a cage

For one chinchilla the minimum size cage would be about 2 foot wide x 2 foot high x 18 inches deep, but ideally they should have a larger cage as they are quite active in the night, e.g. 3 foot wide x 2 foot high x 18 inches deep.

A standard chinchilla cage is constructed of strong wire mesh, this mesh should **not** be coated in plastic which could be chewed and swallowed. Wooden shelving should be provided inside the cage to give them a place to rest off the wire; they will also appreciate a wooden house or box to retreat to.

Accessories you will need include:

- a hay rack (unless one is built into the cage),
- a water bottle,
- a food dish which cannot be knocked over,
- a dust bath,
- food and hay,
- chinchilla dust or chinchilla sand. Do not use ordinary sand as this is too coarse.
- litter - wood based cat litter is ok. Alternatively you may line the litter tray with newspaper provided the chins can not reach the paper. Do not use sawdust as this is too fine, and do not use cedar wood shavings (cedar is harmful to chins).

The cage is best sited where other animals will not bother your chinchilla; away from draughts; not directly in front of a radiator; and not in direct sunlight where they may be at risk from heat exhaustion. A good spot is against the wall, or in the corner of the room where the chinchilla will feel less exposed.

When your chinchilla arrives home place them in their new cage and leave them alone for the rest of the day. Before they start to interact with you they need time to settle in, investigate their home, and become accustomed to all the new smells and sounds around them.

### Toys

Chinchillas enjoy chewing, and need to chew in order to prevent their teeth becoming overgrown, chewable toys are therefore ideal for chinchillas. Avoid toys that have small or sharp, metal parts, or have plastic parts. If (or when) your chinchilla chews these they will end up swallowing the plastic and could end up with a blockage in their intestine.

Items which are suitable to leave in your chinchillas cage are:

- hanging parrot toys
- sisal ropes (again designed for parrots, but chins love them)

- pieces of pumice stone
- some rabbit or large hamster toys
- wood or branches, e.g. kiln dried pine (not fresh pine), apple, pear, or willow.

## Feeding

Three words: **Hay and Pellets**

All a chinchilla needs is good quality hay and pellets; and fresh water - a very basic diet is without doubt the best diet for them.

Hay needs to be available at all times as it is *essential* in helping wear down their teeth and keep them in trim. If your chinchilla is not eating its hay then reduce the amount of pellets you feed to encourage eating of hay. It is also a good idea to provide a cuttlefish bone to chew on as this provides calcium which is essential for healthy teeth.

You will see mix foods which say they provide a good balanced diet however problems which become apparent when feeding a mix food are:

- Most mix foods contain treat foods.
- Given the choice most chinchillas will pick out their favourite food and choose not to eat the rest. Chinchillas can become picky - they will tend to eat more treat foods and less of the other ingredients.
- A diet rich in treats is not considered a good diet for a chinchilla.
- A mix food is formulated to provide a good balanced diet **based on the assumption that all ingredients are eaten.**

When changing your chinchillas diet do it slowly in order to decrease the risk of digestive problems. Start by mixing in a little of the new food into the existing food, then over the course of a one or two weeks (approx.) gradually increase the quantity of new food, and decrease that of the old food.

## Feeding Treats

Although pellets and hay are all that a chinchilla needs they can be given some treats. All treats offered should be low in salt, sugar, fats and oils, therefore commercial foods, e.g. biscuits, crisps, crackers etc. should be avoided. Nuts and seeds should also be avoided or given only occasionally as they are high in fats and oils, for example pecan nuts contain approx. 70g of fat per 100g. All treats should be given in small quantities, and only one or two each day as too much fresh fruit, veg, and grains can cause digestive problems. Peanuts and corn should not be given.

Treats which can be given are:

- **fruit**, try fruits with seeds, not stones or pits, e.g. raisins, dried cranberries, dried strawberries, dried blueberries, dried rose hips, a banana chip, or a piece of apple, pear, grape, or kiwi.
- **veg**, e.g. piece of carrot, flaked peas, parsley, chard, romaine, a dandelion leaf (small and washed). Avoid anything gas forming, e.g. broccoli, cabbage.
- **dried herbs**, if available you can pick herbs, then after washing them, hang them upside down (in bunches) in a warm area until they have completely dried out. Herbs suitable for chinchillas include: oregano, comfrey, mint, nettle, dandelion, and raspberry leaves.
- **grain**, e.g. rolled oats, oat grouts, healthy cereals low in sugar like Shredded Wheat or Cornflakes.
- **nuts and seeds**, very sparingly - e.g. almonds, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, flax seeds.
- **commercially prepared**, e.g. chinchilla crackers (produced for chinchillas and available in the UK), a small piece of dry toast, or an alfalfa-based animal treat.

When introducing a new treat, do it slowly - introduce one treat at a time, and when first feeding it to your chinchilla only give a small piece. If you have just bought a chinchilla and are not sure if they have been given fruit before then start by only give one small piece at first.

## **Taming and Handling**

A chinchilla can live up to 20 years so you have plenty of time - take your time getting to know your chinchilla, a weeks progress can suffer a severe setback if you inadvertently scare your pet.

Remember that chinchillas are timid and can easily become frightened; each chinchilla is different and the time it takes to develop trust between you and your new chinchilla will vary with each animal - some animals can take six months or more to trust their owner completely. It is worth remembering that in the wild a chinchilla is a prey animal - and they have evolved to be alert to dangers, and to run and hide if there is something they are not sure of.

Approach the cage slowly and speak quietly and gently to your chinchilla, offer them a raisin or some other small treat. Chinchillas are naturally curious so after a while s/he should come to the side of the cage and accept the treat. When your chinchilla is happy with this try reaching into the cage and offering a treat, do not pursue your pet - be patient and let them come to you, and allow them to explore your hand and arm. As your chinchillas trust in you increases you can try stroking their back, and in time you may be able to pick them up. It has to be said here that some chinchillas will never like being picked up.

## **Exercising Your Chinchilla**

Once your chinchilla trusts you enough to handle them it is possible to let them out of their cage. Some owners allow free run in their lounge area, while others use the kitchen, hallway, bathroom, or bedroom. Whichever play area you chose you will need to chin proof. This involves ensuring that:

- no electrical (or telephone) wires are available for chewing,
- they cannot get behind or under any gas fires, fridges, freezers, washing machines etc. where they may become stuck or may come to harm,
- you have no objects lying around that you really **don't** want to be chewed,
- the toilet seat is kept down - chinchillas have died or been badly harmed by toilet incidents.

Your chinchilla will need to be supervised at all times. When you leave the room for five or ten minutes you may walk back in to find your pet has managed to climb up and reach some electrical wires, or has discovered the delights of wallpaper stripping!

Use caution - while your pet is outside the cage it is extremely important to know their whereabouts, they can move very quickly, but at other times they can move very quietly - it is very easy to turn around and tread on your chinchilla! Likewise before sitting down check the seat, your chinchilla may have pinched that spot.

Getting your chinchilla back in the cage can be a challenge. It is a good idea to avoid chasing them, especially if you are still working on gaining their trust. One method is to offer them their bath, when they hop in just take them back to their cage.

## Health

The most important thing to keep in mind is that by the time you notice your chinchilla is feeling poorly, they may have been ill for some time. If an infectious illness is suspected isolate them from other chins, then take them to the vet as soon as possible rather than try to guess what may be wrong and possibly giving inappropriate treatment.

Having said that chinchillas tend to be healthy animals. Problems that may occur include: overgrown teeth, diarrhoea, constipation, heat stroke, fur fungus, eye infections, colds, hair ring.

### Teeth

Chinchillas can get overgrown teeth or tooth spurs. If your chinchilla appears to be having difficulty eating, is reaching their paw to their mouth frequently, and particularly if you notice wetness around the mouth or on the chest then take it along to the vet as soon as you possibly can. These symptoms may indicate tooth problems which in some cases can require surgery - treatment is best undertaken before the chin loses too much weight and weakens through lack of food.

Chinchillas can also develop cavities - so beware of giving too many sweet treats!

### Digestive problems

These can occur due to change of diet, too much fruit and vegetables, or through illness. Again a visit to the vet is in order. A chin with constipation may benefit from extra exercise, while in the event of diarrhoea the following may help: withhold all treats, offer your chin charcoal in the form of bird charcoal, or extremely well done toast (completely blackened).

### Heat stroke

The summer heat can cause a problem for chinchillas because their bodies are not designed to cope with heat - they have a thick fur coat and they do not sweat. Chinchillas do not like temperatures above 80 degrees Fahrenheit (27 Celsius); but you should not wait until the temperature becomes this high before attempting to cool them down as chinchillas can die from overheating! As a general rule if the combined temperature and humidity are greater than 150 then one or both need to be reduced. It is best to aim for preventing the temperature from exceeding 70 - 75F.

A chinchilla suffering from the effects of heat may lie on one side and remain motionless, the ears may become pink - this is most noticeable in beige chinchillas, or those with pale coloured ears. They may also have difficulty breathing.

To keep your chinchilla cool:

- *Keep the heat out*
  - If the sun will shine in through the window then ensure the cage is not near the window. Keep the curtains at least three quarters closed when the sun is on the window.
  - A thin dark material over the window will help keep out the sun, but let in the air.
  - Consider buying curtains or blinds which have thermal properties - these keep out heat in summer, and retain heat in winter.
  - For a chinchilla room, or chinchilla outbuilding you could paint coolglass on the window. This is used on greenhouses to provide shading and will wash off. Look for it in shops selling gardening products.
- *Let the heat out*
  - Opening the windows may cool the room down, however if there is no breeze you may simply be letting warm air in!

- *Cool the cage area*

A number of methods have been suggested to do this:

- Find some **really** cheap tins of soup/beans etc. Remove the labels and freeze them. When they are frozen run them under a warm tap for a moment to remove the white frosting (the kind your fingers may stick to!), dry them and put them in the cage.
- Fill and freeze ice cream containers, or use frozen tins, ice packs, or terracotta tiles. When frozen place them on top of the cage. Warm air rises and cold air sinks, so the temperature in the cage below should fall. You may want to ensure condensation does not drip into the cage.
- Large beach stones (or similar) can be frozen and put in the cage - your chin can sit on them and try chewing them. Alternatively use terracotta pots/tiles.

I use ice packs on top of the cage if I will be out all day during very hot weather; however if you use any water filled plastic container (e.g. ice packs for picnic boxes) then ensure your chin cannot chew the plastic and make it leak! Note that terracotta tiles are best wetted before freezing.

### Fur fungus

If your chins has fur fungus the vet will prescribe an antifungal powder which can be mixed in with the bath sand - the fungus should start to clear in a few days. Do not confuse this with fur biting - some chins bite their own (or another animals) fur so that it appears short and bristly - it is thought this can sometimes be caused by stress.

### Eye infections

If your chins eye is closed, and/or has a discharge coming from it then this may be an infection, or it may be the result of a scratched eyeball. Until you see a vet you can make the chin a little more comfortable by trying to keep the eye open: make some tea (no milk, no sugar) and allow it to cool, use some cotton wool dipped in the tea and wipe the eye from the inside corner outwards to clear away the discharge.

### Colds

Cold symptoms in chins are similar to those in humans, including the runny nose! Ensure your chin is warm enough and is continuing to eat and drink. If the chin has problems breathing or appears to have a fever then see a vet immediately.

### Hair ring

A male chinchilla may develop a penile hair ring if they do not clean themselves properly. This can result in severe discomfort and even death, it needs to be carefully removed, either by the vet, or yourself (if you are confident and have a friend to hold the chin). A little lubricant like Vaseline or KY jelly can help.