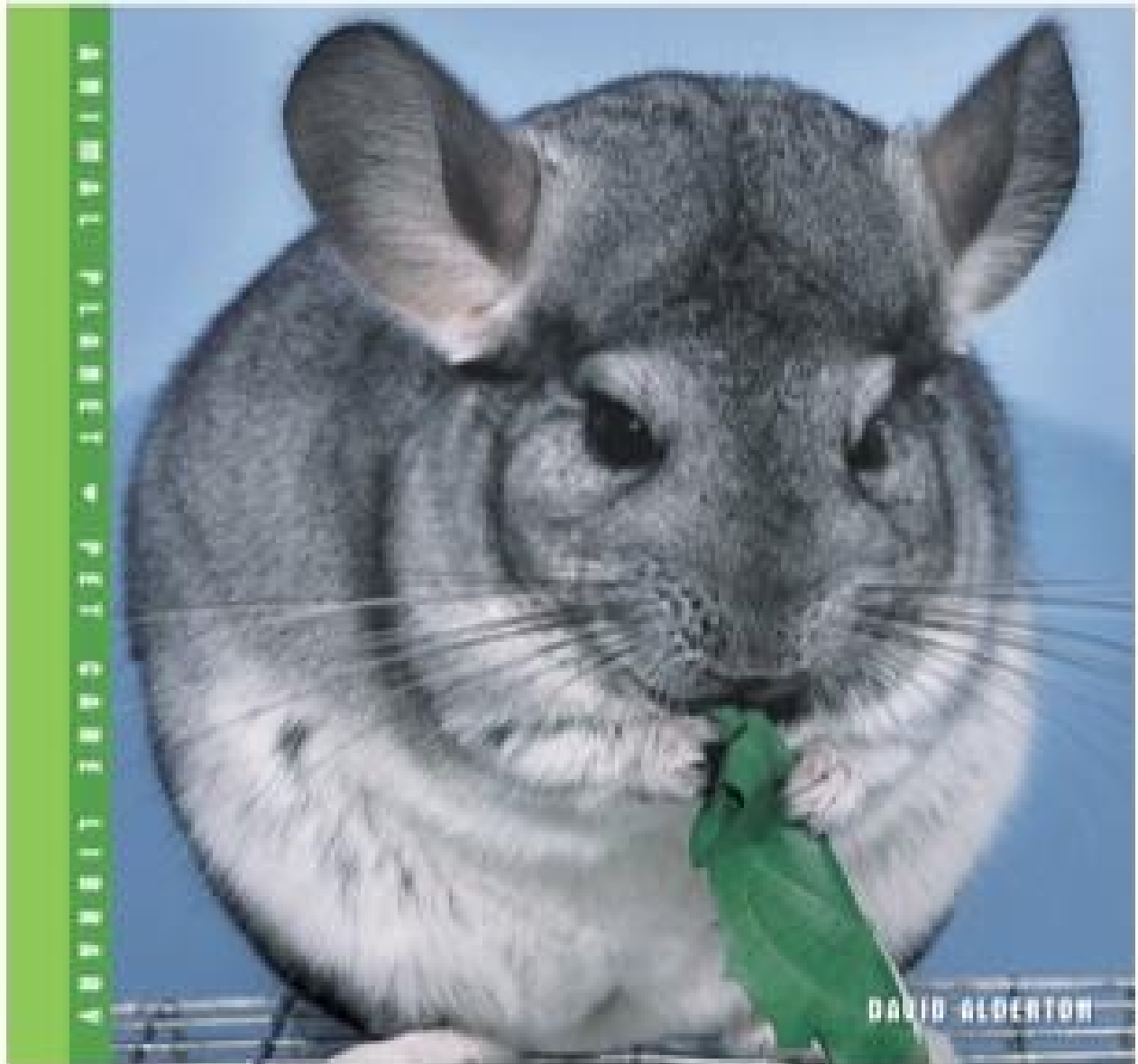


ANIMAL PLANET Chinchillas



Chinchillas

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Chapter 1: Why I Adore My Chinchilla

Chinchillas, or “chins” as they are affectionately known, are growing rapidly in popularity as pets today, thanks to their cuddly appearance and friendly nature. They are not difficult to care for and can soon become very tame, particularly if you start out with a young chinchilla. Their care is quite straightforward, and provided that they are housed in suitable surroundings and their specific dietary needs are met, you are unlikely to face costly vet bills. One of the great advantages of chinchillas compared to other pet rodents such as hamsters, is their much longer life span. It is not uncommon for chinchillas to live for 15 years or more.



Best known for their luxuriant, plush fur, chinchillas are native to the Andes Mountains of South America.

Natural History

Understanding the physiology and behavior of wild chinchillas can be helpful when interacting with your pet because domestic chinchillas still retain many of their instinctual traits and physical attributes.

Chinchillas belong to a group of rodents known as the caviomorphs. They are therefore related to guinea pigs and share a number of their characteristics. One of the most significant things that set caviomorphs apart from the largest group of rodents called the myomorphs (which includes rats and mice) is a difference in their breeding habits. Caviomorphs have small litters born after a long gestation period, which lasts about four months in chinchillas. The young look just like small versions of their parents at birth. They have their eyes open and are able to move around immediately. By comparison, myomorphs breed much more rapidly, and their offspring are naked and helpless at birth. Caviomorphs also tend to attain a larger size, with the world’s largest living rodent, the capybara (*Hydrochaeris hydrochaeris*), being a member of this group.

Chinchilla Taxonomy

*All domesticated chinchillas today are believed to be descended from the long-tailed chinchilla (*Chinchilla lanigera*). Although they were once regarded as a single species in the days they were first discovered, zoologists have since recognized the short-tailed chinchilla (*Chinchilla brevicaudata*) as a separate species in its own right.*

In the Wild

The natural habitat of the chinchilla is high in the Andes Mountains of South America. The thick, plush fur they are known for protects them and helps them survive the bitter cold in the Andes. The distribution range consists mainly of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina.

These rodents live in mountainous areas at altitudes up to 16,500 feet (5000 m), where the temperature may become very hot during the day and fall back significantly at night. In some areas

chinchillas occupy rocky retreats, but often they live in underground burrows that they dig themselves. Their distribution appears closely allied to that of a large terrestrial bromeliad plant, locally known as cardon (*Puya berteroniana*). Sometimes, chinchillas also share their accommodation with other creatures as well, notably chinchilla rats (*Abrocoma* species), which bear a distinct similarity to them despite having an obvious rat-like tail. They do not interbreed, however.

Chinchilla colonies formerly numbered in the thousands in suitable areas. Today, however, the largest known group consists of no more than 500 individuals, with most groups comprising fewer than 50 individuals. There can be difficulties, though, in terms of finding and counting chinchillas because they are shy by nature, and their lifestyle helps them avoid detection. Their large eyes reveal that they are crepuscular by nature, which means that they will only emerge from their hiding places in search of food when darkness starts to fall.

Physical Characteristics

Wild chinchillas are a grayish shade, which helps them blend in with the background of their environment, although even this may not be sufficient to protect them from all predators. Owls, in particular, possess excellent nighttime vision and represent a serious threat because they are able to fly silently and swoop down without warning. The chinchilla's large ears may sometimes help to detect the approaching danger, however, because his hearing is quite sensitive.

Living in colonies also brings some survival advantages, making it easier for these rodents to detect the presence of foxes that prey on them, thanks to the presence of many eyes and ears in the group. Chinchillas are reluctant to stray far from their burrows so that they can scurry back quickly to relative safety if danger threatens.

Their large whiskers also help chinchillas orientate themselves in darkness. These are thickened, specialized hairs that have a sensory function that allows them to determine whether they can squeeze safely into a gap.

The other obvious feature of a chinchilla's body is the discrepancy in the size of his limbs. His front legs are much smaller than his hind legs. Chinchillas rely largely on their powerful hindquarters when moving. The lower part of their hind legs is relatively free from fur, especially on the underside, with the area further up the leg being well muscled to allow them to run quickly if required. Because they are exceptionally agile creatures, they are also able to hop and jump well. Chinchillas can even clamber over rocks and other obstacles using their short front legs. This is of real benefit in an environment where the ground may slope steeply because it helps them move quickly while maintaining balance. It can make the difference between life and death for an individual seeking the safety of his burrow when being pursued by a fox.

Because they are able to support their weight on their hindquarters, chinchillas can have a relative good view of their environment. With various members of a group remaining alert in this way, ambushing them becomes a much harder task. The furred tail of chinchillas also helps them maintain their balance when sitting or standing on their hind legs. The fur here is longer and has a coarser texture than on the body itself.

The digits on the chinchilla's front paws are rather specialized, and they are often used like fingers. This allows a chinchilla to pick up and nibble pieces of food, as well as groom himself regularly, which is an important activity.

Chinchillas Today

In the past, chinchillas were all considered to belong to a single species, but today, zoologists divide them into two separate species, although both are found throughout their range. Those who are kept as pets are thought to be descended from the long-tailed chinchilla (*Chinchilla lanigera*), which is no

found only on Cordillera de la Costa and the Andean slopes of Chile. A special protected area known as the Las Chinchillas National Reserve has been established in this region in an attempt to increase their numbers. In the past, early European travelers documented seeing thousands of these rodents there, but now their total population is thought to consist of no more than 5,500 individuals.

The short-tailed chinchilla (*Chinchilla brevicaudata*) is considered to be even more endangered and the situation is worsening. Despite being protected, the species is now believed to have died out in Lauca National Park, a global biosphere reserve established in northern Chile in 1970. To the east in Bolivia, it has also become scarce, although it used to have a wider distribution than its long-tailed cousin. The subspecies called the king chinchilla (*Chinchilla brevicaudata chinchilla*) is already extinct in the wild. A single preserved example of this race is on display at Frankfurt's Senckenberg Museum in Germany, serving as a sad testament to the mass slaughter of a unique and rare species.

Back in the 1970s, it was even thought that long-tailed chinchillas had died out, but during the middle of that decade, they were rediscovered in Chile. Although they are now strictly protected and there is no trade in their fur, the future for the remaining populations appears uncertain. Today, habitat changes are a major threat to their continued long-term survival in the wild. As a result, the surviving colonies are increasingly at risk of becoming isolated in small enclaves because they are unable to move into other areas and form new colonies with neighboring chinchillas. This then makes it difficult for any increase in numbers to take place. An additional problem is that chinchillas do not have a high reproductive rate, so any increase in their numbers is naturally rather slow.

Nevertheless, there are groups working to promote the conservation of chinchillas in the wild by seeking to protect their habitats. They are also working through education by encouraging local children to be more aware of these small animals while involving landowners in conservation projects as well. The overall aim is to ensure that people and chinchillas can coexist in harmony.

Life Span

Chinchillas potentially live for up to 20 years, which means that their development is slower than that of most pet rodents, whose life expectancies may be as short as two years. This in turn means that chinchillas are unlikely to be mature until they are at least seven months of age. Their gestation period is also lengthy as far as rodents are concerned, lasting around 111 days on average.

Early Human Contact With Chinchillas

The chinchillas' earliest contact with humans occurred during pre-Columbian times. They came to the attention of the Incas, who desired them for their thick, silky coats and used the plush pelts to create magnificent gowns for their rulers. Chinchillas also were regarded as a source of food during this period.

When the Spanish invaded the region in the 1500s, they encountered these luxurious garments which led to a limited export of chinchilla fur to Europe, where it was highly prized and often incorporated into the clothing worn by royalty. It was not until the 1800s that a massive surge in demand for the fur occurred, resulting in chinchillas being hunted in ever-increasing numbers. Records reveal that between 1840 and 1916, at least 7 million pelts were exported from Chile alone and estimates suggest that the total number of chinchillas killed throughout their range could have been as high as 21 million individuals.

Trade at this level was clearly never sustainable. Before long, the numbers of these rodents plummeted, and by the 1920s, chinchillas were facing extinction. Up to this point, several attempts had been made to farm chinchillas, but they all failed. Then a mining engineer called Mathias

Chapman, who had been working in the region for the Anaconda Copper Company, decided to see if he could succeed in breeding what were by then very rare animals.

The first problem he faced was obtaining breeding stock. In spite of his endeavors, he only succeeded in acquiring 11 suitable breeding chinchillas over a period of four years leading up to 1920. But Chapman eventually identified the problems that had beset earlier breeding attempts and transported his precious new breeding stock back to California, where they started to breed successfully and gradually increased in number. Once widely bred, their fur was used in the manufacture of garments worn by the wealthy, with 150 pelts required to create a single full-length coat. It was not until the 1960s, however, that they first started to attract the attention of the pet trade.

People eventually realized that chinchillas have much to offer as companion animals. They look very attractive, with their large ears, bushy tails, and silky fur—quite unlike the popular image of rodents. They are fastidious in their grooming habits, and their dense coat protects them from parasites. The thickness of the chinchilla's fur can be gauged from the fact that there can be as many as 80 different hairs growing from a single hair follicle, whereas humans only have one hair per follicle. Their popularity has since soared, and nowadays they are kept as pets in many different countries around the world.



Because of the exportation of wild chinchillas for their fur in the early 1900s, they are now nearly extinct in their natural habitat and are considered an endangered species.

Domestication

Chinchillas still rank as one of the more costly pet rodents, and this is essentially because of their slower reproductive rate. As domestication has proceeded, a number of different color variants have emerged, and this has provided an additional focus of interest for breeders. Shows are also held in some areas, with the exhibition side of the chinchilla-keeping hobby likely to grow even more as new colors become more widely available.

Judging of the exhibits in a show does not entail comparing animals with each other but actually assessing them against the so-called “ideal” example of the variety concerned as described by the breed standard. This standard details all the desirable features that judges should be looking for in terms of the chinchilla's physical appearance, or “type” as it is often known, as well as his coloration. Some chinchilla organizations are now holding their own shows wherever support is strong enough rather than simply having classes exhibited as part of other small animal events. If this aspect of keeping chinchillas appeals to you, search online to track down details of shows being held near you.

Chinchillas as Pets

Chinchillas are easy pets to care for, particularly because they can be accommodated without difficulty in the home or even in an apartment. They require very little space, are reasonably inexpensive to keep, and are quiet by nature. Their feeding needs are easily met, in spite of the fact that these rodents do have very specific dietary requirements. Nevertheless, they need little more than special food pellets, which are widely available at most pet stores, along with good quality hay, although they can be given some fresh foods in small amounts as well.

If you decide to keep more than one chinchilla, you will find that they get along well together. Mo

can be tamed without difficulty. Unlike many rodents, they also do not have any unpleasant odors associated with them. They are very clean creatures, not suffering from fleas or similar parasites, and they keep their wonderful coats in top condition with regular dust baths.

The potential life span of these rodents means that you could end up with a pet that lives longer than either a cat or a dog. However, this is a responsibility that needs to be thought through carefully beforehand, especially if you are seeking to obtain a pet for a child because you could ultimately be left caring for the pet. Vacation times are rarely a problem, though, as it is usually very easy to find a friend or neighbor who can accommodate your chinchilla in your absence.

Why Chinchilla?

The descriptive name of the chinchilla was given to these unique little rodents by the Spaniards who encountered them following their invasion of South America during the 1500s. The name commemorates that of the Chincha Indian tribe. Chinchillas were hunted for food but were desired more for their pelts, from which the Chinchas made luxurious garments. The word "chinchilla" literally means "little chincha."

Choosing a Chinchilla

Chinchillas are becoming increasingly available through pet stores, although if you are looking for an unusual color, you may have to find a breeder through a hobbyist magazine or the Internet. Ideally start with a young chinchilla who is at least 16 weeks old and therefore fully weaned. He should come from an environment where he has become used to being handled, and so should already be quite friendly by this stage. Young chinchillas can be recognized by their smaller size compared to adults but if you want to take on an older individual, there is no absolute guarantee of his age. It is almost impossible to determine how old a chinchilla is once he is fully grown.

Do not rush the decision when it comes to choosing a chinchilla. After all, you are deciding on a companion who may be part of your daily life for as long as two decades, and this is a big commitment.

General Appearance

The first thing to ensure is that your potential pet is healthy, so start by looking closely at the chinchilla in his environment before attempting to pick him up. The droppings in his quarters should appear firm and dry, never loose, which is a sign of diarrhea. This is a particularly serious condition for chinchillas. And although it may seem hardhearted, do not acquire one who is obviously ill because he may be difficult to nurse back to health.

Look also at the chinchilla's temperament. He should be bright-eyed, alert, and active. Although most chinchillas are sleepy during the day, they will soon wake up when being handled. Youngsters are especially lively by nature, and this is a good sign; adults are slightly less active.

The condition of the fur is important. It should be plush, standing out from the body, and soft to the texture. If it appears flattened and matted, this is a sign of general ill health. The eyes should be bright and the ears should be free from any tears, which are reflective of past injury. There should be no discharge from the nose or signs of sneezing.

Before you pick up a chinchilla who appeals to you, ask the owner's permission. Handling him will give you an indication of his weight and also enable you to carry out a closer check on his health. With rodents, it is especially important to examine the incisor teeth at the front of the mouth. You can do this by gently pulling down the fur on the chin so that you can see the lower incisors. Place your fingers on each side of the upper jaw as well to lift the skin and check that both pairs of incisors are present and meet normally. On occasion, a tooth may be broken or deviated in some way, which will

make it difficult for the chinchilla to eat normally. This may be reflected by a loss of weight and poor condition.

Dental problems are not just encountered in older chinchillas; they can afflict younger individuals too. The failure of the teeth to meet correctly, known as dental malocclusion, is often considered to be a genetic problem. Therefore, affected individuals should never be used for breeding purposes. Unfortunately, dental malocclusion is generally an ongoing condition that cannot be cured. Almost inevitably, the teeth of an affected individual will need to be trimmed back perhaps every two months or so because they will continue to grow throughout his life. Taking on a young chinchilla with this problem is potentially a major undertaking. It will be very expensive if you do not feel able to perform the teeth trimming yourself and need to rely on the services of a vet to do this for you.

Colors

An ever-increasing range of chinchilla color varieties is now available, with the normal form traditionally described as the standard. There are some variations in coloration, however, in which certain individuals appear much darker than others. Their fur is bluish-gray and is darkest on the upper area of the body, with the under parts paler in color. Close examination of the fur shows that the individual hairs in the coat are banded down their length. This alternating pattern of three dark bands with intervening paler areas is known as agouti and often can be seen quite clearly when you part the fur. There is also a mutation in captive stock in which the agouti banding is missing and the dark coloration running down the hairs is solid; these chinchillas tend to appear darker as a result. The chinchillas' coloration camouflages them in the Andean region where they dwell, helping them blend with the vast rocky, mountainous areas.

Pale Colorations

The first color variants of the chinchilla were recorded in the 1950s, and prominent among these were white varieties that are still popular today. The Wilson's white, named after the original breeder, can be distinguished from other whites because it is not a true albino form. It has dark rather than pink ears and black instead of reddish eyes, although like a true albino, the fur is pure white. There is also a pink-white variety that more closely resembles the albino, although it still retains some pigmentation on the body, having faint beige tipping known as veiling on the fur.

There is also now a pied form called the mosaic that has highly variable markings. Some mosaics are predominantly white in color with relatively small darker areas of fur, whereas other individuals, perhaps born in the same litter, may display much more extensive dark markings. It is impossible to predict the likely patterning of the offspring from that of the parent in the case of the mosaic variety.

Attractive beige-colored forms are now quite common; they are a champagne shade with white under parts. These are frequently described on the basis of the name of the breeder who was responsible for developing a particular strain, such as the Willman beige. They can vary in depth of beige coloration, with lighter-coated individuals having an almost creamy appearance. The individuals are sometimes rather confusingly also described as pearls, whereas those with darker beige coloration are referred to as pastels.



You can obtain a chinchilla from a breeder or pet store, or you can adopt one from a local shelter or rescue.

Darker Colorations

A number of the varieties that have arisen in chinchillas are darker than the standard in color. The first example of this type was the black velvet, which was developed in 1956. It has since become popular thanks to its sleek appearance. These chinchillas are pure black in color with a contrasting white belly. There is also now a paler charcoal variant. Its coloration is grayer than that of the black velvet; it is a less dense shade of black that is sometimes also described as the ebony.

There is also both a brown velvet, where the coloration of the upper parts of the body is solid, corresponding to that of the black counterpart, and an ordinary brown variant, which displays less intense brown coloration equivalent to the charcoal.

One of the most unusual and more recent chinchilla mutations is the violet, which was developed in Zimbabwe. It is a pointed variety, which means that it has darker coloration evident on the extremities of the body and on the face, feet, and tail, somewhat similar to a Siamese cat in terms of its patterning. Other rare color variants are encountered occasionally, such as the sapphire, which is gunmetal blue with white under parts. Others will almost certainly emerge in the future.

The increasing range of new colors is significant as far as chinchilla exhibitors are concerned, offering them greater scope for competition. Each variety may ultimately end up with an individual standard for judging purposes and may be grouped in separate classes as well. As far as pet owners are concerned, though, this is not especially significant simply because the temperament of the different mutations does not vary to any noticeable extent. You are likely to find that the rarer colors are more expensive to purchase than the standard color.

Male or Female?

There is not really much difference between a male and a female chinchilla as a pet because both are likely to prove equally friendly. Do not be tempted to acquire a pair of chinchillas at the outset unless you are certain that you have the time and inclination to care for them and their offspring. If you think that you want to follow this path in the future, however, you can do so easily if you start out with just a single female. Never purchase a male and female chinchilla from the same litter for breeding purposes because they will be closely related, and this may increase the risk of birth deformities and a decline in litter size. Seek out unrelated stock instead.

Family-Friendly Tip

Chinchillas as Children's Pets

Chinchillas are suitable as pets for older children, typically those who are at least seven years old, because they will be able to take some responsibility for the daily care of their pet. You will have to teach your child not to allow the chinchilla out of his quarters without your knowledge, however, and certainly not to take him outdoors, where he could easily run away and might tragically end up caught by a predatory animal.

The Expert Knows

More Than One?

Chinchillas are social animals by nature, so it is preferable to keep two together if you have the available space. If you want to keep more than one, choose female chinchillas because they are less likely to be aggressive toward each other as they mature. Also, if you want only one chinchilla but think that you might like to acquire another one in the future, start off with a female because it is easier to introduce females than males, who tend to be more aggressive and territorial.

Gender Determination and Breeding

Gender is particularly significant if you are seeking to house chinchillas together, whether you intend to breed them or not. To identify whether a chinchilla is male or female, pick the individual up and turn him or her belly up. The spacing between the two orifices close to the base of the tail provides the best means of determining gender. The ano-genital gap is relatively short in the case of females but is much longer in males. Once a male chinchilla is about three months old, the testes will become apparent as swellings in this intervening space. In the case of adult chinchillas, it actually can be possible to distinguish the sexes without having to pick them up. Mature male chinchillas are generally not as large overall as females and their heads appear proportionately bigger.

Consider Adoption

There are a number of chinchillas who end up homeless for various reasons, and you may want to approach an animal rescue charity in your area to see if it has a suitable chinchilla who needs rehoming. Bear in mind these pets may have been neglected or mistreated. As a result, they are unlikely to be as friendly as a young chinchilla who grows up in your home; with patience, though, you may be able to win their confidence. Always be prepared to give a donation when acquiring a chinchilla under these circumstances so that the rehoming program can continue for those chinchillas still in need.

Chapter 2: The Stuff of Everyday Life

You'll need to organize everything you require for your chinchilla's care before bringing him home. You must decide what sort of housing setup you want, as well as buy food, feeding bowls and a water bottle, and a supply of bedding material and furnishings. Not everything your pet should have in his enclosure may be available from your local pet store either. You will probably have to purchase wood to make a shelf and possibly build a nest box, too, if you are not buying one.

Chinchillas require relatively spacious housing, not just because of their size—they are one of the largest pet rodents—but also because they are lively by nature. You therefore need to think carefully about where your pet can be accommodated in your home at the outset. Choose an area where you can see your chinchilla easily and where you can enjoy watching him play. The location should also give you the opportunity to interact with him daily, which will then help as far as the taming process is concerned.

Chinchillas and Heat

Chinchillas are essentially indoor pets and cannot be kept outdoors for climatic reasons. They are susceptible to heatstroke and are also vulnerable to illness in damp surroundings. Once the temperature rises above 75°F (24°C), you will see them start to show signs of heat stress. As a way of trying to lose heat from their bodies, they stretch out rather than remaining hunched or curled up as they normally do. Their respiratory rate changes, with their breathing becoming more labored.

You must take action at this stage, transferring your chinchilla to a cooler environment where he will not be exposed to drafts. Placing a fan that is blowing out colder air in his vicinity will also help, but again, you need to be sure that he is not being exposed to a draft. Obviously, if your home has air conditioning, your chinchilla should be kept in a room where you can set the temperature lower and more within his comfort zone.

Where to Keep Chinchillas

Like other rodents, chinchillas are rather nervous by nature, simply because they feel instinctually vulnerable to predators. Even though they have been bred for many generations in captivity, they have not lost this fear. As a result, they are likely to feel stressed if exposed in the center of a room because their housing can be approached from all sides. It will be much better, therefore, if you can position your pet's quarters against a wall, preferably in the corner of a room, depending on the position of nearby furniture. If your chin can only be approached from the front and possibly one side of his enclosure, he will feel more relaxed.

Likewise, your chinchilla's quarters need to be relatively tall to allow him to jump and clamber as chins do in the wild, so do not rest your pet's cage on the floor. Towering over him like a potential predator will probably cause him distress, which will make him more likely to scurry for cover whenever anyone is in the vicinity. A situation where you are at a similar height and can easily reach into his quarters from the side with your hand will be far less threatening to him.

You may have a suitable piece of furniture that will support the cage, or alternatively, you might consider seeking a cage that is supplied with a stand of some kind, although the unit must be secure. Raising the cage off the ground gives additional protection against drafts, and it should also keep your pet from being confronted by the family dog or cat. If you have a cat, ensure that the cage is tall enough or positioned in such a way that it reaches close to the ceiling. This will prevent your feline from climbing up on top of the chinchilla's housing and menacing him from above.

Avoid placing your pet's housing in rooms that tend to overheat or in front of a window because

when the heat of the sun is magnified by the glass, it is likely to cause him to suffer from heatstroke, potentially fatal condition. In general, chinchillas do not like heat, so avoid a location next to radiator as well. You may even need to be prepared to move your pet to a cooler spot in the summer if the weather becomes very hot.

A hall or stairway area of any kind is not an ideal environment to keep your chinchilla either because he is likely to be exposed to drafts. For similar reasons, he shouldn't be kept in the kitchen because he could be affected by toxic fumes, as well as sprays used to clean appliances. Kitchens also may become too humid or hot for your pet when you are cooking.

Although a child may want to keep her pet in the bedroom, this is not a good idea. As the occupant of the room is supposedly going to sleep, the chinchilla is just waking up, and his activity can easily provide sufficient distraction to keep a child awake. Being housed in this part of the home also means that there is less opportunity for the family as a whole to interact with the chinchilla and enjoy his company. The more interaction he has with family members, the happier he will be. Chins are social animals who need a daily dose of attention and affection, especially if you are only keeping one.

Housing

Various chinchilla cage designs are now on the market. They are frequently sold in flat packs, with the unit easily able to be assembled using special clips that attach to a set of mesh panels. A floor tray is normally included as part of the pack. Always choose the largest cage that you can accommodate to ensure that your chin has plenty of space to move around. He needs to be able to climb in his quarters, so the height is important. At an absolute minimum, the size of the quarters needs to be at least 2 feet x 2 feet (0.6 m x 0.6 m).

Flat-pack housing of this type made especially for chinchillas is preferable to using an indoor aviary because it tends to be more robust. The strong incisor teeth at the front of a chinchilla's mouth enable him to destroy plastic easily, including the protective covering on most cage bars. These materials also may upset his sensitive digestive system if swallowed, sometimes with potentially fatal consequences.

Another consideration to bear in mind is the size of the door opening. It must be sufficiently large to allow you to reach into the interior easily and lift your chinchilla out. Not all aviaries have large doors that are suitable for this purpose. If there is a plastic base, it needs to be attached in such a way that it will be out of the reach of your chinchilla's teeth.

A solid floor inside the housing is recommended. Although a mesh floor allows dirt to drop through out of reach of your chinchilla, it can place him at risk of injury. The spacing of the mesh strands is significant, with young chinchillas particularly at risk because their smaller feet could slip down through the mesh. Sitting on a mesh floor also can cause hair loss on the body and sores to develop on the feet. This usually won't happen with a solid base, but you will have to spend more time cleaning the quarters and removing droppings so that there is no risk of illness and to keep your chinchilla's luxuriant coat from becoming soiled.



Lively by nature, chinchillas require relatively spacious housing so that they can move about and climb easily.

The Importance of Retreats

Another basic design element that should be included in your chinchilla's quarters is a shelf that allows him to rest off the ground. This will need to be combined with a nest box nearby where he can sleep during the day. The typical dimensions for a nest box can be up to 20 inches (50 cm) long, with the height and width of the box about 10 inches (25 cm). The size of the entrance hole is very important because it needs to allow your pet easy access to the interior. On the other hand, it should not admit so much light that it deters him from sleeping. Taking these factors into account, an entrance hole of about 6 inches (15 cm) in diameter should prove adequate.

Chinchillas are, of course, not arboreal by nature. A nest box simply corresponds to the tunnels in which these rodents live in the wild. It will provide your pet with a snug retreat—not effectively off the ground, but simply one that is theoretically located further up the mountainside.

Some chinchillas also will take advantage of a retreat provided on the floor of their quarters. This should be in the form of a clay pipe, with a diameter at least as large as that of a nest box to provide easy access but still feel secure. It should also be relatively heavy and as such is better kept on the ground. Do not be tempted to substitute a lightweight plastic length of drainpipe because again, it is likely to be damaged by your chinchilla's teeth.

By offering a choice of retreats, you can help your pet feel more secure in his quarters. Perhaps rather surprisingly, chinchillas are more likely to show themselves if they have a range of places to hide from view within easy reach because this helps them feel safer and mimics their lifestyle in the wild.

The Expert Knows

Activity Cycle

Chinchillas are nocturnal, which means that they are most active from dusk onward. This makes them ideal pets if you are away at work or school during the day because they will be waking up when you come home. They will remain active overnight, particularly if their home is equipped with a play wheel—but you will need to ensure that it runs smoothly so as not to cause a disturbance that may keep members of the household awake. Be wary if you find that your chinchilla appears lethargic and is out during the day because this can be a possible indicator of ill health, especially if linked with other signs such as a change in the appearance of his droppings.

Floor Coverings

Coarse wood shavings are most commonly used for bedding material, assuming that the cage has a solid base. It is vital only to buy shavings sold specifically for pet bedding. These should not be made from harmful types of wood and should be free from any toxic wood preservatives. Cedar wood, for

example, contains potentially dangerous resins that will obviously be present in shavings of this type. Bedding doesn't have to be eaten to cause ill effects; both dermatitis and respiratory problems may arise from exposure to unsuitable bedding.

Provide a relatively thick layer of shavings on the floor of your chin's quarters, at least 1 inch (2.5 cm) overall, so that he can maintain a good grip. A tool sold for spot cleaning cat litter trays will be useful to help you keep the base of the enclosure clean. By removing droppings and uneaten food daily, you won't have to change the entire floor covering as often.

Furnishings

Besides having adequate space for movement, another practical reason for having a large floor area in your chinchilla's quarters is the number of items that will need to be included in it. These include a food bowl and a dust bath, plus climbing facilities and toys.

Climbing Branches

Whatever type of housing you choose, it will be necessary to include some branches. These will enable your chin to utilize the height of the cage in particular, helping him climb up and down from his resting shelf easily. The choice of branches is important. They should be cut from trees that are neither poisonous nor treated with chemical sprays of any kind in the recent past. This helps to protect chinchillas because in addition to running up and down these branches, they will also gnaw at the wood itself.

Certain fruit trees such as apple and sycamore are generally safe, but other trees such as cherry, yew, and laburnum are likely to be toxic. All branches should be relatively thick so that they will support a chinchilla's weight, and ideally quite straight, which should make it easier to fix them in place. They must be secure so that they cannot be dislodged and fall down within the cage, causing injury or even death as a consequence. Avoid trying to wire the branches in place, though, because they could end up trapping your pet's feet. It is better to attach them using a clamp or screw-type fixture, depending on how they are positioned. If a branch starts to become badly gnawed, be prepared to replace it before it collapses.

Food and Water Containers

Dry food should be kept separate from fresh food items that you offer your pet, but in both cases, a heavy earthenware bowl like the ones usually sold for use with dogs or cats is recommended. Plastic containers are easily destroyed by a chinchilla's teeth and are too light. Heavier bowls work better because they are more difficult to tip over. Also, food spills can potentially leave your pet without a reliable food source. Because they cannot be dislodged easily, stainless steel containers that hook onto the sides of the cage are another option. They cannot be damaged by a chinchilla's gnawing teeth, and, again, are easily cleaned as necessary. Free-standing stainless steel bowls can, however, be tipped over by a chinchilla's weight, and so are far less suitable.

Never provide water in an open bowl. Aside from the risk of the bowl being tipped over and water soaking the bedding material, this type of container is easily polluted with cage debris and droppings. Bowls also use up valuable floor space—and worse yet, your chin's coat will become wet if he steps into the water. Instead, choose a water bottle that has a stainless steel spout with a ball in the tip that attaches to the outside of the cage. This will enable your pet to drink without difficulty, provided that the spout of the water bottle is placed at a height roughly in line with (or just above) his mouth and not too close to the ground.

A gravity-fed system is at work in the spout of water bottles of this type, so they shouldn't leak because water will only flow through it when the chinchilla is drinking and using his tongue to press back the ball. Occasionally, some chinchillas may manage to dislodge their water bottle or may even

succeed in piercing the bottle with their teeth. There are shields available that will help to prevent this from happening. It is also a good idea to position the water bottle on the cage in such a way that if it is dislodged for any reason, it will only fall a short distance and so is less likely to shatter.

Custom-Made Cages

If you have difficulty purchasing the size of cage that you want, it may be possible to have the panels made up for you. Consider approaching businesses that fabricate aviaries and dog runs.

The mesh size of the wire should not exceed 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) square so as to minimize the risk of any injuries to your pet's feet, and it needs to be at least 16 G (16 gauge) in thickness. The door unit should be hinged so that it opens outward, which makes it easier to service the interior of the quarters.

Hay Racks

Another important piece of equipment that should be incorporated into your chinchilla's quarters is a place to provide hay. Although some owners favor wire hay racks, they may sometimes be dangerous because of their open-weave design. It's also not a good idea to scatter hay on the floor where it can be mixed up with bedding. An alternative is to use a separate heavyweight bowl to provide hay. You can cut it up into smaller pieces with scissors and tease it out into individual strands so that it is less likely to be dragged around the cage. Additionally, this method gives you the opportunity to remove any unwanted plants such as thistles.



Retreats such as nest boxes help your chinchilla feel more secure in his quarters.

Exercise Wheels

Exercise wheels provide an excellent opportunity for chinchillas to cover relatively long distances by paddling around in them, which simulates activity they are naturally accustomed to in the wild.

A wheel must be totally enclosed, however, with no gaps between the rungs through which a chinchilla's foot might slip. Furthermore, it must fit snugly up against the side of your chinchilla's accommodation so that there will be no risk of injury, particularly to the tail, which might otherwise become trapped and is especially vulnerable to getting hurt or broken.

Chews

The four sharp incisor teeth at the front of a chinchilla's mouth will continue growing throughout his lifetime. This is actually beneficial under normal circumstances because of the amount of wear to which these particular teeth are subjected. If they did not continue to grow, it would soon become impossible for a chinchilla to continue eating. What can happen, however, is that a chinchilla may not use his teeth sufficiently in the confines of a cage. As a result, the incisors are likely to become overgrown, hampering the animal's ability to eat.

You should therefore provide your chinchilla with several gnawing blocks that he will instinctively use to maintain his dental health. Most pet stores offer a range of safe blocks, but only choose those that are made of wood rather than types such as those sold for dogs. Because these other types of pet chews may contain nutrients, they could upset your pet's digestive system.

Bedding Warning!

Avoid sawdust as bedding material because of its fine nature—it is much dustier than shaving and is likely to cause repeated sneezing. It also can lead to eye irritation, especially because chinchilla's eyes are so prominent. Old newspapers should not be used as bedding for chinchillas because they are likely to be shredded, possibly staining the fur, and because they may contain poisonous chemicals that could be harmful if consumed.

Bathing and Grooming Equipment

You will need a bath for your chinchilla. Bathing is essential to maintaining the quality of his coat, although this bath will not contain water but a special dust.

Chinchilla baths are now commercially available. They are usually designed with a translucent plastic cover that sits over a tray, with a hole at the front through which a chinchilla can enter. The clear plastic allows you to watch your pet bathing while at the same time preventing the fine powder from scattering outside of the cage. This is important because some owners may be allergic to the dusting powder, which is similar to the volcanic ash that chinchillas use in the wild to keep their fur in top condition. Bathing in dust helps to remove greasy oils from the coat. Do not be tempted to use sand of any type because it could be carcinogenic.

Broad-sided trays have traditionally been used for chinchilla baths and are still available. They offer an advantage if you have more than one chin because they can share a bath. Chinchillas often seem to like the opportunity to bathe in this way. As well as having a practical purpose, bathing can be a social activity.

Where hand grooming is concerned, you will need to have a suitable comb. Regular combing will prevent your chinchilla's hair from becoming matted. A comb will be especially important during the molting period when the coat is shed because it helps to strip out loose hairs.

Preparing Cage Branches

Before placing branches in your pet's enclosure, scrub them in a bucket of hot water using a clean brush. This will remove any greenish algae growth or wild bird droppings that will contaminate the wood and be harmful if ingested. Ideally, choose wood that appears clean and dry from the outset.

Do not be tempted to clutter the interior with a number of thin branches because one or two thicker pieces are sufficient. Thinner branches cut into short lengths also can be provided separately on the floor of the cage for your chinchilla to gnaw on.

Carriers

It is never safe to transport chinchillas in cardboard boxes because their sharp incisor teeth will allow a determined individual to escape easily from such confines. Therefore, it's always a good idea to invest in a secure pet carrier. Aside from using it to take your chin to the veterinarian or offering him a sheltered haven when you travel, a carrier will be useful on a regular basis because you can transfer him into it when you clean his quarters. Doing this is much safer than allowing him to wander about the room because your attention will be elsewhere, and you may not see your pet getting into a dangerous situation.

A small traveling crate like the ones sold primarily for small dogs or cats is appropriate. Many carriers of this type are designed in such a way that they are collapsible and can be folded flat when not in use. If you use one of these, just make sure that it is securely fastened together when you reassemble it, and be sure to line it with some fresh shavings. You also need to ensure that the door of the carrier is always securely closed so that there is no possibility that a chinchilla could escape from

the carrier in transit.

Cage Maintenance

Chinchillas are not messy pets, so it's relatively easy to keep their quarters clean. A dustpan and brush basically will be all that you require to sweep out the cage. You will also need a bucket and scrubbing brush for washing it out. To remove soiled bedding, tip the cage litter straight into a refuse container, sweeping up any that spills. The water bottle can be cleaned in hot soapy water with a bottle brush, and the food bowls can be scrubbed easily in this way as well.

It helps if you can wash the various parts of the cage outdoors. Make up a disinfectant solution following the product directions closely. Clean off as much dirt as possible before washing everything because it may reduce the germ-killing strength of the disinfectant. When you are done, rinse the cage and equipment thoroughly with clean hot water. Shake the components to remove as much water as possible and wipe them dry with paper towels before reassembling the cage. Only replace the bedding after it has dried thoroughly because chinchillas should not be exposed to damp surroundings.

Preparing New Equipment

It is always a good idea to wash off all new equipment, just to ensure that it is thoroughly clean. Good hygiene is also particularly significant when you bring new pets home because they are most likely to fall ill following the stress of a move. Young individuals are especially vulnerable because their immune system that helps to protect against infection may not be as effective at this age as it is in adults.

By having everything ready and in place, you can simply transfer your new chinchilla to his home with minimal disturbance. If you have decided to keep more than one chinchilla, try to obtain both individuals at the same time so that they can be placed in their new quarters together. This will be much easier than trying to introduce a second chinchilla at a later stage. If you are thinking of breeding chinchillas in the future, however, you will obviously need a different setup that will accommodate more than one individual.



Social animals, chinchillas require more than routine care; they need a daily dose of attention and affection, especially if you are only keeping one.

Early Days

With everything prepared, you can place a new chinchilla in his quarters as soon as you get him home. Leave him there quietly to explore his new surroundings and settle down.

Keep a discrete watch to ensure that he has eaten and drunk by the next day. You can mark the water bottle with a felt-tip pen for this purpose. If you have young children, reinforce the door closure with a padlock so that you can avoid the risk of the door being opened in your absence, which could lead to your chinchilla escaping into the room and getting lost and frightened.

Do not be disappointed if your chinchilla appears nervous at first. This is quite normal, and it will take him time to settle into his home with you. By providing a number of hiding places, you have helped him feel more secure because he knows that he can dart back into them if he feels threatened rather than being left in the open.

Allow your chin to stay essentially undisturbed over the first couple of days, although you will need to keep watch to ensure that he is eating properly and that his droppings are normal. It is particularly important not to change his diet at this stage because this can trigger a digestive disturbance. Continue to offer the food that he has been accustomed to, even if you decide that you want to change it at a later date.

Making Progress

Looking after a chinchilla's daily needs is quite straightforward. Hopefully, within just a few weeks of acquiring your pet, you will already be noticing just how much friendlier he has become as the result of the time you spend with him. By providing him with a proper home and spending quality time daily, you will continue to develop the bond between you.

Homemade Toys

You can make a number of items for your chinchilla that will offer him entertaining places to hide away in or explore in his quarters. Wooden houses of any type are likely to be favored, and they can be quite elaborate in design. However, do not paint or stain anything you make because these materials are likely to be toxic if gnawed in any way. You can give small wicker baskets of suitable dimensions to your chinchilla, although these too are likely to end up being destroyed by chewing.

Cage Cleaning Schedule

Daily: Provide fresh drinking water and food in clean containers.

As needed: Spot clean bedding on the floor. Replace branches that are chewed.

Weekly: Change the floor covering entirely and wash food bowls and water bottles.

Monthly: Strip down and clean the quarters thoroughly using a special pet disinfectant.

Family-Friendly Tip

Children and Responsible Pet Care

Children love chinchillas, partly because of their cute appearance and their soft fur. But parents must be prepared to oversee most of the work involved in caring for any pet to ensure that all his needs are being met. It is particularly important to stress that children must never give their pet sweets or anything other than a few specific healthy treats without adult supervision; this could not only upset a sensitive digestive tract but might even prove to be fatal. You must also establish the rule that the pet is only to be handled when you are there and show your children how to do so safely.

Chapter 3: Good Eating

Proper nutrition is an important aspect of any pet's daily needs, and it is essential to his good health. Although it is very easy to feed chinchillas, you need to have an understanding of how their digestive system works. Otherwise, they are likely to suffer from serious health problems. Because chinchillas don't adjust quickly to changes in their diet, they are also susceptible to digestive disturbances if fed unsuitable food.

Diet in the Wild

Chinchillas are vegetarians, although not a great deal is known about which plants are most important as far as their diet in the wild is concerned. Their digestive system is well adapted to breaking down this type of food and obtaining maximum nutritional benefit from it.

The incisor teeth at the front of a chinchilla's mouth have an important part to play in this process, allowing him to nibble cleanly through even tough plant stems without difficulty. This is because of the teeth's sharp cutting edge; they are not flat but slope and are shaped rather like a chisel. There is a thicker covering of hard enamel on the front of the incisor teeth, with an area of soft dentine behind that wears away more rapidly, maintaining this sloping profile.

There is also a long gap in the jaws extending back behind the cheek teeth. This is very significant for vegetarian rodents like chinchillas because it means that while the rodent is nibbling at shoots, he can effectively pull in the skin of his cheeks behind the incisors. This folded skin then acts rather like a curtain, ensuring that the animal cannot accidentally swallow any small stones or other debris while feeding, which might cause him to choke.

The vegetation on which chinchillas feed can be tough, especially because they live in relatively inhospitable surroundings where environmental conditions are naturally harsh. After nibbling through plant matter with their incisor teeth and tearing it into pieces that can be swallowed easily, they will then chew it up using the molar teeth at the back of the mouth.



Chinchillas subsist on a vegetarian diet in the wild.

The Digestive Process

The natural food of chinchillas is low in nutrients, which means that relatively large quantities need to be consumed to meet their nutritional needs; this demands an efficient digestive system. Unfortunately, this biological process is not easy. Chinchillas are forced to rely on beneficial microbes (in the form of bacteria and unicellular organisms called protozoa) to break down the cellulose that is present in the cell walls of plant matter so that they can digest their food properly.

There is a blind-ending sac, known as the cecum, at the junction between the small and large intestines where these microbes are primarily located. The cecum corresponds to the human appendix.

It is relatively large in chinchillas because it is here that the digestive process occurs. The bacteria and protozoa only operate effectively within a narrow set of environmental conditions; any changes in the relative acidity (pH) in this part of the gut means that not only will they cease to function effectively but harmful bacteria also may start to flourish here instead, resulting in a severe digestive disturbance.

Diet Risks for Pet Chinchillas

In the wild, chinchillas have a fairly constant diet, which helps to keep the microbial population in their gut stable. Unfortunately, if you vary a pet chinchilla's diet significantly, it will alter the normal conditions within his intestinal tract and can kill off many of these necessary microbes. This means that he will not be able to digest his food properly and that he is likely to develop diarrhea and suffer weight loss as a result. Changes to diet therefore need to be made over a period of several weeks, with daily adjustments being relatively slight so as to allow the microbial population to adapt.

Fiber has an important role to play in the health of a chinchilla's gastrointestinal system. It helps to propel food through the digestive tract by bulking it out and ensuring that there is no major shift in the pH of the cecum, which is so critical to the chinchilla's overall well-being. Lack of fiber also can be linked with constipation because the food takes longer than normal to pass through the gut.

Will Tunnel for Food

Suitable food is scarce in the Andean region of South America, which is the chinchilla's native home. These animals are forced to feed largely on dry grasses, as well as forage for the leaves and shoots of small, low-growing shrubs in the region. The arid nature of the landscape means that cacti are common here, and chinchillas have evolved ways to overcome the sharp spines that are associated with these plants to feed on them as well. The quisco cactus is a tall growing species that may attain a height of up to 13 feet (5 m). It produces fruits called guillaves, of which chins are very fond. Often impatient for the fruit to fall to the ground, they have evolved an unusual way to reach it before it has fallen.

Obviously, chinchillas cannot clamber up the outside of a cactus because of the spines that would painfully stick into their bodies. Instead, they use their sharp teeth to tunnel into the firm core of the cactus, clambering up from the inside. Presumably, their sense of smell allows them to know when they have reached a level where there is fruit on the outside of the cactus. They then use their sharp incisors to gnaw their way through to the outside to reach the guillaves. These cacti are slow-growing, and so undoubtedly, successive generations of chinchillas have tunneled in and out of them in this way, with minimal obvious impact on the plant itself because it has continued to flourish.

Basic Nutrients

The basic nutrients that chinchillas need are similar to those that humans require. They need protein for growth purposes, and they utilize carbohydrates primarily as a source of energy. Fat is used for insulation in the body and is incorporated into cell membranes. It also represents a concentrated energy store that can be broken down to meet the body's additional energy requirements if necessary.

Vitamins are required for a variety of purposes in the body. They can be subdivided into two groups: the fat-soluble vitamins such as vitamins A and D, which are stored in the liver, and the water-soluble vitamins such as the vitamin B complex, which is made up of a range of individual components such as thiamine (vitamin B1) or riboflavin (vitamin B2). Members of the vitamin B group are involved in metabolic processes that take place within individual cells. They are known as water-soluble because they are not stored and can be washed out of the body via the kidneys. They potentially can result in a deficiency in some cases if these vitamins are not adequately provided or they are absent from the diet altogether.

Chinchillas also require a range of inorganic chemicals in their diet known as minerals. Calcium and phosphorus, for example, are the key ingredients in making bone. Trace elements such as iodine which are needed in lesser quantities, are also necessary to ensure that the body functions well.

Feeding Chinchillas

It may sound as if it is quite difficult to provide a suitable, balanced diet for chinchillas, but in reality this is not the case. In the early days, when chinchillas were farmed for their fur, it soon became apparent that providing them with a standard supply of food was vital, both for the health of the animals themselves and also to make it easy to keep them on a large scale. Considerable research into their nutritional needs has since been carried out, and this has led to the development of pelleted diets that contain all the nutrients they need to remain in good health and to breed successfully.

Pellet Foods

Numerous pelleted diets are widely available at pet stores today. Chinchilla pellets themselves comprise a range of different ingredients not actually based on the type of food that these rodents would eat in the wild, but rather on items that are widely used in the animal foodstuffs industry. As a result, ingredients include items such as soybean and peanut meal, as well as alfalfa, which is a type of grass.

Various brands are sold, although the choice is far more limited than in the case of dry food marketed for dogs and cats, and distinctions among chinchilla diets are less significant as a result. Nevertheless, do not allow yourself to run out of food for your pet because you may find that the particular brand you use is out of stock at your local store.

You can make changes to your chinchilla's diet, but the key to avoiding any risk to his health is to do so gradually rather than suddenly replacing one type of food with another. Again, because of this, it is a good idea always to keep a spare bag of food at home so that you will never run out.

Chinchilla food is marketed in packs of different sizes, but do not purchase a large quantity if you only have a single individual. A chinchilla will only eat just over 1 ounce (30 g) of pellets per day as a general rule.

Always check the pack for its use-by date prior to purchase because the vitamin components will fall significantly in potency if you use out-of-date food, leaving your chinchilla's health at risk from nutritional deficiencies. You therefore need to be certain that you will be able to use up the pack's contents before the expiration date because otherwise you will have to discard it. On this basis, chinchillas are not expensive pets to feed.

The way in which food is stored is also important. Choose a relatively cool spot away from direct sunlight. Keep all packages sealed to exclude air, which can harm the vitamin content. You also must store food in a dry place. If the packaging becomes saturated and water reaches the contents inside, you will need to discard it simply because the dampness will trigger the development of harmful molds that are likely to cause upset or illness in chinchillas eating the spoiled food.

The Expert Knows

Feeding Schedule

Some chinchilla owners prefer to offer their pets a restricted amount of pellets each day, typically about 2 tablespoonfuls daily for an adult and slightly more for youngsters who need additional nutrients to support their growth. Pregnant and nursing females require additional food as well.

A number of keepers follow what is often described as an ad-libitum feeding method, which means providing chinchillas with access to an unregulated supply of food. This is safe because

they generally do not overeat as far as their pellets are concerned, although it is a different matter if they are given unrestricted access to fresh foods. There are specially designed hoppers suitable for the free-feeding of pellets.

Daily: Measure out your chinchilla's food in the evening and provide it to him when he wakes up. Also, check whether more hay is required.

Later in the evening: Provide a treat, preferably at the same time each day, when you can be around to keep your chinchilla company so as to strengthen your bond with him.

The Importance of Hay

Another important ingredient that chinchillas require as part of their daily diet is hay. Hay is necessary because although pellets represent a concentrated source of nutrients, they do not contain sufficient amounts of the essential fiber that is needed as part of a balanced diet. The chinchilla's digestive system is adapted to eating relatively large volumes of vegetation that is low in nutrients in the wild, so commercial pellet formulas are often bulked up to account for this and to ensure that the animals stay healthy.

High-quality hay is essential. It can be purchased from most pet stores, ready packed in plastic bags. Hay made primarily of timothy grass is usually recommended, or alternatively, alfalfa hay can be used. Be very careful of other types of hay. You do not want to choose a variety that is dusty because it is likely to have harmful effects on your chinchilla's respiratory system, especially if the hay is stale or smells moldy. Beware of other components in the hay that could be harmful, too, such as thistles or even sometimes poisonous plants.

Only purchase hay in relatively small quantities so that it will be as fresh as possible. Slice open the plastic bag to create a small hole through which you can extract hay as required. Store the bag in a dark location if possible. This should ensure that there is no risk of other rodents, such as mice, tunneling into the supply. Should this happen, it will not be safe to use for chinchillas because of the possible risk of spreading disease from the mice.

The amount of hay that a chinchilla requires is about a handful daily, but it doesn't need to be measured out precisely. Although chins should always have a fresh supply available, you can just top it off as necessary. It is important to keep hay off the cage floor so that it does not become muddled up with bedding. You can use a special hay rack as mentioned previously, but it may be better to use one only with older animals because the lively nature and small size of young chins puts them more at risk of becoming trapped in them.

There is an alternative to using actual hay: alfalfa cubes, which are a form of hay. Not all chinchillas are willing to sample these, however, especially if they have always fed in the past on ordinary hay. The dense texture of the alfalfa cubes can be off-putting, so try breaking up one or two of the cubes slightly to see if this encourages a reluctant chinchilla to eat hay in this form. Until you are certain that your pet will eat these cubes, do not invest in a large quantity of them because you may not be able to persuade him to eat them regularly or at all.

Each chin will typically require about a cube every day. Do not leave your chinchilla without hay for any length of time because, again, this will upset his sensitive digestive system. It also may cause him to start pulling out his own fur to make up for the lack of fiber in his diet. Only restrict the amount of hay you provide if you know that your pet has not eaten any for a while. Providing an unrestricted quantity may otherwise cause him to gorge himself under these circumstances. Therefore, simply measure out the usual daily amount for the first few days until his desire for hay is satiated.



Your chinchilla's nutritional needs are easily met with a quality pellet food, some fresh fruit and greens, hay, and clean water.

Hay Mixes

Different types of hay can be mixed together, with each having slightly different nutritional properties. These can include oat, timothy, and alfalfa. Also, if you have a backyard where Bermudagrass grows, it too can be added to the diet to offer some fiber variety. It is very important that the grass has not been treated with any chemicals, however, and as a further precaution, be sure to wash it off and shake it dry before offering it to your chinchilla. Never place it on top of the bedding before it dries completely because the dampness will cause shavings to stick to it, which would be harmful. It is better to provide it in a clean food container instead.

Vegetables

For a balanced and varied diet, offer your pet some fresh foods, but again, only in small amounts so as not to precipitate any digestive upset. When offering greens, avoid members of the cabbage family, such as broccoli and brussels sprouts, which can give rise to gas production in the intestinal tract.

Vegetables that chinchillas can eat include red-leaved forms of lettuce, which are far more nutritious than ordinary green lettuce, and the tops of carrots. A piece of parsley or a small bit of chard are other possibilities. Beware of store-bought vegetables, though, because they may have been sprayed with pesticides—only buy organic in this case.

The quantity of appropriate greens or vegetables that you offer should be restricted to prevent intestinal distress. It is not actually essential for chinchillas to be given greens. However, if you wish to provide them and your pet has not been used to eating them, increase the amount you are offering gradually. Large amounts are not required; one or two pieces each day will be adequate. Always wash and shake dry the stems, and if necessary, chop them up so that they will fit easily into a food dish. This will prevent your chinchilla from dragging his food across the floor of his quarters.

The other critical aspect when it comes to feeding greens or vegetables is that they must always be fresh. This ensures that your chinchilla receives maximum benefit from the vitamin content of the herbage and that he is not at risk from anything on it that can endanger his health. You can buy most of what your pet requires in the way of fresh foods at a local supermarket or at a vegetable stand.

Home Gardens

If you have a backyard, you might enjoy growing a suitable range of fresh foods for your chinchilla, and you can do so in pots on a windowsill. This is a fun way to guarantee a constant fresh supply. You can either obtain packets of seeds for this purpose, which you can sow in suitable compost at home, or alternatively, you can purchase potted herbs from supermarkets or garden centers. Generally, those that have been cultivated for backyard use rather than immediate culinary purposes tend to be more robust for growing in this way.

Supplements

Various supplements, available both in powder and liquid form, can be used with chinchillas. While powdered supplements are usually sprinkled over the damp surfaces of fresh food such as a slice of apple, liquid supplements should be added to your chinchilla's drinking water. In most cases, though, unless your chinchilla is recovering from illness, there is no need to use supplementation of any kind because all your pet's nutritional needs should be met in her regular food pellets.

Additionally, there is a risk that if you use a supplement, your chinchilla could be at risk from a vitamin or mineral overdose. If you do resort to using one, do not exceed the recommended limits as a precaution. Rather than a general supplement, it may sometimes be necessary to offer a specific calcium supplement in the case of a pregnant female. This is something that your veterinarian can advise you about. For the safety of your pet, always check with the vet before using any kind of medication, vitamin, or product with which you have no previous experience.

Herbs for Chinchillas

Mint (*Mentha*) comes in many different varieties and is a hard, tough plant. If you are planting this in a backyard, however, set some paving slabs in the ground so that you can curb its growth, because some strains can be very invasive, spreading via their vast root system underground. Keep it well watered in dry spells, and grow it in partial shade. In the winter, mint tends to die back, so if you want to continue having a fresh supply, you'll have to dig up some of the roots and transfer them to a flower pot, which you can grow in a well-lit part of the home until warmer weather returns.

There are also many different strains of basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) you can grow. This is a plant that requires relatively warm conditions and tends not to thrive outdoors in temperate areas, even in the summer.

Not all herbs suitable for chinchillas have an upright growth, as in the case of thyme (*Thymus*). This plant creeps over the ground, so if you want to grow it in a pot, it will trail down the sides. Thyme is a relatively hardy herb but needs to be cut back regularly to prevent the stems from becoming woody.

Oregano (*Origanum*) also has a relatively similar pattern of growth. It too can be cultivated easily in a corner of the garden, dying back during the winter in colder climates before sprouting up again in the spring. Cutting back the stems can encourage more growth, but it may be past its best offering by the summer.

There are some wild herbs that you can gather as well, with dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) leaves especially popular with chinchillas. Do not pick these from lawns or roadside verges, however, because they may have been treated with chemicals. Dandelion leaves tend to be most available in the spring and early summer, with a second flush of growth occurring during the early autumn in temperate areas. It is usually possible to find leaves throughout much of the year, though.

Dandelions are easy to cultivate during the winter period. Dig up several of the long whitish roots from these plants before the cold sets in, and chop them into lengths of about 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm). Then set these pieces vertically into pots, with one end just protruding above the surface of the soil. This will ultimately be where the leaves develop. Keep the pots in a sunny warm spot. Within a few weeks, you should be rewarded with a crop of leaves that you can offer your chinchilla for a yummy snack.

Treats

Chinchillas, rather like humans, will not instinctively eat only what is good for them. This is why

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