



Chinchilla

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The chinchilla is a member of the rodent family that is native to the mountains of South America. Chinchillas are known for their large ears, and soft and luxurious fur for which they have nearly been trapped to extinction in their native countries. Today chinchillas are raised for both purposes: pets and pelts. Chinchilla laniger is the main species bred today. They tend to be fairly clean, odorless, and friendly pets but usually are shy and easily frightened. They do not always make good pets for young children as they tend to be high-strung and hyperactive. Their fur is extremely soft and beautiful bluish grey in color thus leading to their popularity in the pelt industry. Color mutations include white, silver, beige, and black. Their average weight falls between 400 to 600 grams (females tend to be larger than males) with an average lifespan of 6-10 years.

Diet

Providing proper nutrition is one of the most important aspects of keeping your chinchilla healthy. Chinchillas are herbivores and require a special diet that is rich in vitamins and high in fiber, the bulk of which should be provided by a high quality pelleted diet. The make-up of this ration should contain 16% to 20% protein, 2% to 5% fat, and 20% to 35% bulk fiber. Commercial chinchilla pellets are available, if not found a mixture of Guinea Pig and Rabbit pellets can be fed. Avoid buying in bulk to prevent pellets from aging.

In order to promote proper intestinal motility unlimited access to fresh, spoilage free hay is crucial. Timothy, grass, brome, oat and wheat hay are the best options. Alfalfa hay is very rich in calcium and protein and should be avoided. Hay is also beneficial for general health and well being reasons in that it helps to keep the teeth worn down as well as offering an alternative chewing source (aside from the fur). Hay should make up 1/3 to 1/2 of the diet.

Dried fruit and nuts are excellent treats for the pet chinchilla. Raisins tend to be a favorite treat among these animals. Fresh carrots and green vegetables can also be provided but in moderation. Remember, these supplements to the diet should constitute less than 10% of the overall food intake.

Though you may not realize it, ingesting feces is a normal and important part of a chinchilla's diet. Chinchillas produce cecotropes, also called night feces. These special feces are loaded with vitamins and other nutrients, which are ingested after the feces are eliminated.

Clean, fresh water should be available at all times. Water is easily provided in water bottles equipped with sipper tubes and should be placed in a position your chinchilla can reach comfortably. This method also helps keep the water free from contamination. Even though the capacity of the bottles can hold enough to last the chinchilla a few days they should be rinsed out and changed daily.

Handling/Behavior

If handled frequently at a young age, chinchillas adapt well to humans. Be careful when handling them, however, due to the risk of 'fur slip'. 'Fur slip' is the patchy shedding of hair that occurs when the fur is grasped or roughly handled. To avoid this condition, always grasp the base of the tail (close to the body) with one hand, while supporting the body on your opposite forearm and against your body. Chinchillas can also be held around the thorax as done with other rodents. They are agile, fast, and enjoy jumping and climbing. Chinchillas flee and run as their defense; they rarely bite though they still are capable if agitated enough. In addition, and more likely, they may urinate when annoyed.

Housing

A lot of space is necessary to house these active and acrobatic animals. Since they like to climb and jump in both horizontal and vertical directions, a large multilevel cage is recommended. The cage should be constructed of a very small welded wire mesh to prevent leg or foot injury. An area of solid flooring should also be available. Drop pans below the cage are ideal for facilitating cleaning. Glass aquariums or plastic containers can be used, but with caution due to their poor ventilation. Wooden cages should not be used since chinchillas are noted gnawers. Since chinchillas are shy animals, they need a place to hide. Non-destructive boxes work well. Use something that is non-porous and can be cleaned and sanitized well. Chinchillas tend not to get along well when housed together, with the female being the more aggressive gender.

Chinchillas must be kept in an area that is well lit, adequately ventilated, and cool & dry. They do not tolerate heat or humidity, so keep them out of direct sunlight. They thrive at lower temperatures, with an optimal range of 64 to 72 degrees F.

Dust baths should be provided at least once or twice weekly. These must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Finely powdered volcanic ash is used to keep the fur clean and well groomed (many commercial varieties exist). This bath should only be provided for a short time to prevent a perpetual dust cloud in the cage. Enrichment items such as wooden blocks to chew and clean dry cardboard pieces (like toilet paper rolls) to destroy are also recommended. You can give your chinchilla a carpet remnant to sit on and watch him redecorate the cage by moving the rug around and flipping it over. Tree branches also make good chinchilla toys, but choose a mulberry branch or a pear tree branch over toxic ones such as cedar, cherry, or a branch from a citrus tree.