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Chinchillas: Care and Husbandry

Chinchillas are crepuscular rodents, meaning that they are most active during dawn and dusk. Their bodies are about 10-14 inches long with a 5-6 inch tail and they have dense, soft fur. These adorable creatures are native to the Andes Mountains of Peru and Chile. The first chinchilla can be dated back to 1599. By the end of the 19th century they had become very rare due to people hunting them because of their soft fur. Chinchillas did not start becoming popular as pets until the 1960's after being caught from the mountains and successfully bred.



Chinchillas come in many colors. The most common is the standard gray. This is the only color found in nature. Other colors include beige, white, ebony, mosaic and numerous others.

Chinchillas can make excellent pets. Just remember they are usually not very fond of being held and cuddled. If properly socialized from a young age they will be more tolerant of handling. They prefer to run, jump and play freely. Because of this they may not be the most appropriate pet for a young child. With the proper care a chinchilla may live to be 12-15 years old.

Chinchillas cannot tolerate high temperatures (above 80 degrees Fahrenheit). Since they originated from the mountains they are accustomed to cooler temperatures and they cannot sweat. A chinchilla kept in temperatures above 80 degrees can overheat and may suffer from heat stroke. A sign of overheating in chinchillas is red ears; their ears will turn red as they direct blood to their ears to try to dispel heat.

Your chinchilla has a wide range of vocal abilities making noises like chirps, squeaks and barks. These vocalizations help chinchillas locate one another and are a way for them to express themselves. Since your chinchilla is most active during the night time it is not uncommon to hear a lot of vocalization in the morning.

Chinchillas prefer to be housed alone, but if introduced gradually at a young age two chinchillas may become friends. There is however a risk of them fighting and hurting one another. And intact males and females should not be housed together because they will most likely reproduce. Female chinchillas are the dominant sex and are larger reaching about 500-600 grams while males reach about 400-500 grams.

Chinchillas are desert grass eaters. They have a very difficult time digesting fatty or high protein food and cannot eat many green plants. The best diet for your chinchilla is a high quality hay based chinchilla pellet and a never-ending supply of hay. Alfalfa is good for young (under one year of age) or nursing chinchillas. Adults need a more timothy hay based diet as alfalfa has too much protein for adults. Other grassy hays may be offered as well, but timothy should be the most abundant. Additional hays may include orchard, oat or botanical hays. Always make sure the hay is fresh, dry, and free of mildew and mold. You should avoid food with a lot of treats in it as these are like "candy" to your chinchilla and they will often pick out the fatty "candy" and leave behind the nutritious fiber pellets. Fresh veggies and high moisture fruit should be avoided as they may cause gastrointestinal bloating, which can be fatal. Treats such as raisins and dried fruit should be given sparingly no more than one or two pieces once daily, as these may cause diarrhea or diabetes later in life. Nuts should also be avoided because these are very high in fat. Your chinchilla will need access to a clean water source at all times. A water bottle is preferred, just be sure that young chinchillas recognize it as a water source so they don't get dehydrated.

Chinchillas need lots of exercise and therefore need a very large enclosure with a lot of levels on which they can run and jump. For a single chinchilla your cage should be no smaller than 36 x 24" x 24". They also require a lot of play time outside of the cage. Chinchillas are very curious and need a lot of stimulation and socialization. They also may enjoy a large exercise wheel (at least 15 inches in diameter) with a solid surface; toes and tails can get caught and hurt in a wheel with spokes. Birch, willow, apple tree, manzanita or kiln-dried pine are all safe woods for your chinchilla to chew and play with. Conifer and citrus woods like cedar or orange should be avoided as the oils and phenols in them can be toxic to your chinchilla. Toys made of plastic should be avoided as these can be ingested and cause blockages in the intestines.

The bedding in the bottom of your cage should be made of a recycled paper product or shredded newspapers. Litters made of wood shaving may be irritating to the chinchilla's mucus membranes, skin and respiratory tract. Wood shavings may also be contaminated with pesticides or parasites. A chinchilla can be litter box trained by keeping a littler pan in their favorite potty area. This should contain recycled paper product litter that is different from the litter on the bottom of the cage as not to confuse your chinchilla. A hide house should also be provided, this can be purchased from your local pet store and will provide a place for your degu to sleep and hide in.

Chinchillas should never be bathed in water. Their dense fur does not allow them to dry and moisture can cause fungus growth or fur rot. Instead they should be allowed a dust bath. This pumice or fine ground volcanic rock dust can be purchased at your local pet store along with a dust bath house. Your chinchilla should be offered a dust bath daily, the dust helps absorb oil and dirt. They love to roll around and jump in the dust. Just stand back because they may make a dusty mess. A chinchilla's fur is also so dense that it is usually not prone to getting flea infestations. Chinchillas also have low amounts of dander and therefore typically don't cause allergies.

A chinchilla should never be picked up by its tail. As a natural defense mechanism, your chinchilla can slip out of the fur on its tail. You will be left holding a handful of fur as your chinchilla jumps away. This can be very painful and damaging to the skin and soft tissue of the tail. Chinchillas can also suffer from fur slip along its body if held too tight. To pick up a chinchilla always scoop them from underneath with two hands for support.

Potential health concerns for chinchillas include malocclusion or overgrown teeth, fur biting, fungal infections, diarrhea, constipation, heat stroke, diabetes and seizures. To keep your chinchilla happy and healthy he or she should see a qualified exotic veterinarian yearly for their annual checkup.