

OVERVIEW

Chinchillas are rodents native to the Andes Mountains. In the past they inhabited Peru, Bolivia and Chile, but today are limited only to a small area in Chile. There are two living species, one of which (*Chinchilla chinchilla*) is facing extinction. The domesticated animals found in the fur and pet trades are thought to be *Chinchilla lanigera*, which is also now rare in the wild. They can make wonderful pets in the right home. They are inquisitive and intelligent. Although they can be quite affectionate, they require cautious and gentle handling and are not recommended for young children. They are lively animals – especially at dawn and dusk – and can be very fun to observe. Because of their highly social lifestyle, they are best kept by people who will give them daily attention and frequent interaction. They can become very tame and owner-attached. If the owner cannot commit to the necessary bonding, chinchillas should be kept in groups of two or more. Chinchillas may live up to 20 years, making them long-term companions.

HOUSING

Chinchillas are mountain rodents that require cool and dry conditions. They require a wire cage with plenty of ventilation that is kept at 70°F or less and away from sunlight. Heat and humidity will quickly stress and kill them. **Glass or Plexiglas enclosures are inappropriate.** These active rodents love to jump and climb and roomy cages with climbing ledges (shelves) are designed specifically for chinchillas.

FOOD & WATER

Chinchillas require **fresh** feed and are highly sensitive to inappropriate diets. **Both high-quality western timothy or orchard hay and a chinchilla-specific pellet must be offered.** Oxbow and Standlee make two of the best timothy hay products and quality pelleted diets formulated for chinchillas include Oxbow Chinchilla Deluxe and Mazuri Chinchilla Diet. Avoid diets that are anything other than fresh-milled timothy-based pellets. Do not use those that contain seeds, nuts, etc. **DO NOT USE RABBIT OR GUINEA PIG PELLETS and do not use alfalfa, clover and other hays. Do not feed lettuce or other vegetables.** Hay should make up about 2/3 of the diet and pelleted food 1/3. All food must be dry and fresh. An adult chinchilla will only eat about two tablespoons of pellets a day. Purchase no more than a three month supply to ensure that the food does not mold or degrade and lose its nutritional content. Fresh water must be available at all times. Thoroughly clean the water bottle each week. Treats must be used with caution. One or two raisins or sunflower seeds a day is fine, but no more. When transporting chinchillas a small slice of apple can be used as a water source.

GROOMING

Chinchillas in the wild groom their incredibly soft and plush coats by rolling in volcanic ash much like horses roll in sandy soil. Pet chinchillas should be provided with a dust bath at least three times a week. Chinchilla dusts are ultra-fine powders and are available in the pet trade as are open or enclosed dust containers. We offer our chinchillas a clean dust bath every morning for ten minutes. Dust baths should not be left in the cage longer because the chinchillas will use them as shelters and contaminate the dust with feces and may begin to chew on the plastic.

HEALTH

Chinchillas have few health problems when fed a proper diet and housed properly at cool temperature with excellent airflow and low humidity. Most instances of diarrhea or ill health can be attributed to improper diet. The most common health problem seen in chinchillas is a skin fungus that is a strain of ringworm. Ringworm is a common problem in many mammal pets and even humans. The fungus is usually first noticed as bald patches around the nose or eyes, and if left untreated may spread to the feet, genitals and body. Proper environmental conditions, especially good ventilation and airflow, combined with an excellent diet and regular clean dust baths will help prevent fungus. Stress and humidity above 50% frequently are the culprits when fungus occurs. Mix one teaspoon of Captan® powder (a horticultural fungicide) with each 12 oz. cup of chinchilla dust powder as a safe and effective preventative for skin fungus. If a chinchilla shows signs of fungus treatment should begin immediately. Dust baths should not be shared and clean dust should be used daily. Topical application of Betadine® solution is an effective anti-fungal treatment, but a veterinarian should be consulted for any health condition.