

Caring for Your Chinchilla

By Mark Burgess, DVM

Chinchillas are large rodents that inhabit the Andes Mountains at high altitudes. They have been in captivity since 1923. The lifespan of chinchillas is five to ten years, but they have been known to live up to 18 years. They are clean, odorless, and generally friendly pets, but they are often shy and easily frightened. Because of this, they are probably not ideal pets for young children. Chinchilla fur is very soft, and various colors are available, including silver, beige, black, and white. Their large ears and bushy tails contribute to their adorable appearance.



If you're thinking about getting a chinchilla, please adopt your chin from a rescue group rather than buying from a pet store or breeder. There are many wonderful chins out there just waiting to be adopted. To find a chin rescue, do a search for "chinchilla rescue" on the Internet. Or, check out the list of chinchilla rescue groups at www.chincare.com.

Diet

The chinchilla's diet should consist of grass hay such as timothy (not alfalfa) and chinchilla pellets. If necessary, a guinea pig pellet may be substituted. The pellets may be rationed if obesity occurs, but the hay should always be fed free-choice. Avoid pellet mixes containing seeds, nuts or dried fruits, since they may cause obesity or bowel upset. Fresh, leafy green vegetables may be used sparingly (up to 10-15 percent of the total diet). Restrict sweet items (such as fruit, corn, baby carrots, and tomatoes), high-protein items (such as oats, beans, alfalfa, soy, and nuts), and veggies in the cabbage family, since these may cause bowel upset.

Fresh water, of course, should always be available. A water bottle is cleaner and not as easily spilled as a bowl. Remember to clean your chinchilla's cage, food bowls and water sources regularly.

Handling

Some chins bond well with their people. As with most pets, chinchillas become more tame and affectionate if handled regularly; isolated pets may be more anti-social. Chinchillas usually don't bite, but they may jump out of your hands. Always hold your pet firmly with one hand around the front of the body and the other hand supporting the rear legs. A towel may help with restraint if your pet is very jumpy or tries to bite. Chins are also prone to "fur slip," wherein patches of hair come loose with rough handling, so you'll want to handle your chin very gently.

Housing

Chinchillas should be housed in a well-ventilated cage that is kept cool and dry. They don't tolerate heat and humidity; their ideal temperature range is 60 to 72 degrees

Fahrenheit. Wire cages are usually used; glass or plastic cages must be well ventilated to minimize humidity and odor buildup. Wood cages are hard to keep clean and the chin may gnaw through them.

The cage floor can be wire or solid. Wire floors allow waste to fall through, but may cause foot sores. If you use a wire floor, cover the wire with thick straw or provide a solid platform (wood or cardboard) in one area for the chinchilla to sit on. Solid floors should be covered with straw or paper bedding to absorb wastes; clean the cage often.

Chinchillas are very active and require space; a good cage size is 6 ft. x 6 ft. x 3 ft., with a one-foot-square nest box. If a smaller cage is used, ample exercise time outside the cage should be provided. When your chin is outside her cage, be careful to prevent her from chewing on such items as wood furniture, baseboards, and extension cords.

Chinchillas are not very social and are usually housed separately, since they tend to fight when housed together; females are more aggressive than males.

Dust Baths

To maintain healthy fur, chinchillas need dust baths at least once or twice weekly. The bath must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Several brands of “chinchilla dust” (finely powdered volcanic ash) are sold. An alternative is a mix of 9 parts silver sand to 1 part fuller’s earth. The dust should be provided for only a short time during the day.

Common Diseases

Fur slip. Chinchillas often lose patches of fur when handled roughly. Fighting between animals may also cause hair loss. The skin is not injured by fur slip, but the chin’s coat may look unsightly.

Fur chewing (barbering). This is a behavioral problem wherein the chinchilla chews his own fur or another animal’s fur, causing a rough, moth-eaten appearance. Contributing factors may include boredom, dirty fur, diet imbalances, or hereditary factors such as a stress-prone personality. To reduce the incidence of this problem, provide your chin with cardboard chew toys such as paper-towel rolls; minimize stress and disturbances; and keep the cage clean, cool and dry.

Heatstroke. Chinchillas can’t tolerate high temperatures and humidity. When they are overheated, chins often lie on their sides and pant, and they may feel hot to the touch. Excess humidity may produce unkempt, damp fur. If you think your chin is suffering from heatstroke, you should contact your veterinarian immediately, since this condition is often fatal. Treatment starts with misting or bathing in cold water.

Intestinal infection (enteritis). Though a common disease in chinchillas, the exact cause is uncertain. Bacterial, viral and protozoal agents have all been associated with forms of intestinal upset in chinchillas; a fecal exam may aid diagnosis. Poor diet may increase the risk of an outbreak. Symptoms may include diarrhea, depression, appetite loss, abdominal pain or bloating, and partial paralysis.

If your chin has any of these symptoms, seek veterinary care right away because bowel upsets are often fatal if not caught early. Treatment can include antibiotic therapy and

supportive care, bacterial supplements such as milk-free acidophilus, anti-diarrheals such as Kaopectate or blackberry leaves, and bowel stimulants. A chinchilla with a severe case may receive IV fluids.

Dental disease. Chinchilla teeth grow constantly and they are prone to several tooth problems. Malocclusion is a condition wherein the teeth don't properly wear against each other and overgrow. Incisor (front tooth) overgrowth is visible; the teeth may grow to the point where they protrude from the mouth like tusks. Molars (back teeth) may overgrow but aren't visible; signs include drooling, oral odor, difficulty eating, and a wet or soiled chin.

The causes of these problems vary and may include infection, tooth trauma from cage-bar biting, poor diet, and hereditary factors. Treatment includes grinding or trimming the teeth to the proper length, and correction of any known underlying factors. Extraction of some abnormal teeth may be needed.

Tooth abscesses may involve front or back teeth, and can result in facial swelling, odor, appetite loss, and loose or painful teeth. Treatment is via extraction of infected teeth, draining all visible abscesses, and long-term antibiotics. Severe abscesses may involve large areas of the face and may be life-threatening.

Respiratory infection. Respiratory infection can involve the nasal passages, producing sneezing or runny eyes and nose. Severe cases can involve the lungs (pneumonia) and produce wheezing, lethargy, a rough coat and labored breathing. If untreated, this condition can be fatal. Damp, dirty or drafty housing may increase the risk of infection. Treatment includes antibiotics, supportive care, and correction of any underlying problems with the chinchilla's diet and environment.

Ringworm (fungal infection). Ringworm, a common fungus found in soil and on animals, can cause skin disease in chinchillas. Infected pets may occasionally transmit the fungus to other animals or humans. Signs are usually crusty or flaky skin around the face and ears, and sometimes on the feet. Hair loss and scabs may occur. Treatment involves topical or systemic anti-fungal drugs.

Veterinary Care

No vaccines are given, but regular exams are recommended for early disease detection. Have an exam done when you first get your chinchilla, then once a year after that. Chinchillas over five years old may benefit from exams every six months. With good care, your chinchilla can be a happy and lovable pet!

Dr. Mark Burgess is owner of Southwest Animal Hospital/The Exotic Animal Practice in Beaverton, Oregon. Ninety-five percent of his practice is small exotic pets, including ferrets, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, hedgehogs, marsupials, and some wildlife. He lectures at conferences and has published articles on exotic pet disease in medical journals.