

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Chinchillas

-Cathy A. Johnson-Delaney, DVM

Our pet Chinchilla (*Chinchilla laniger*-long-tailed Chinchilla) originally came from the semi-arid and rocky slopes of the Andes Mountains, but has been captive bred for many years.

It comes in a variety of coat colors, but all have the same soft, dense fur. They have very large ears and excellent hearing. They are affectionate, intelligent with sweet personalities. They make great pets as they bond with their owners, are quiet, relatively easy to care for, have no odor and rarely bite. They do require special husbandry items like access to a dust bath to keep their fur groomed. They also need at least 30 min/day of major exercise as they are very energetic. While basically nocturnal, most can adapt to your schedule and be active when you are home during the day. Dogs, cats and ferrets are predators and should not be present particularly when your chinchilla is out of its cage. Cage placement should be to prevent the other pets from close proximity as this may stress the chinchilla. They usually do not litterbox train, but may primarily urinate in one corner of the cage. Feces tend to be scattered.

Diet

Commercial chinchilla food, unlimited timothy hay, and access to fresh water make up an ideal diet. They also may have some portions of orchard or oat grass, brome, or mixed hays for variety. 1-2 tablespoons of pellets a day is enough for an adult as long as they have unlimited hay. Avoid sugary treats such as fruits or raisins, or fatty foods such as sunflower seeds or peanuts.

Husbandry

Chinchillas can be housed individually or in pairs or in a polygamous group with a single male and 2-4 females. The cage size should be at least 3 X 2 X 2 feet with the more space preferred. PVC tunnels and hide boxes can be provided. Substrate can be pellets or shreds of recycled newspaper. Dust baths are best provided in a separate area than the home cage. One set-up is to have a large cardboard box with the tray of chinchilla dust (available at most pet stores) in the middle. The tray should be 2-3 inches deep. The chinchillas usually will "bath" for 10-15 minutes and can be offered the bath 3-5 times a week. Chinchillas cannot tolerate temperatures above 82 degrees F (28 degrees C) leading to heat stroke. Optimal temperature is 50-68 degrees F (10-20 degrees C). They also do best at low ambient humidity, preferably below 50%.

Vital Statistics

Life Span	9-17+ years
Body weight	
Adult female	450-700 grams (note females larger than males)
Adult male	400-500 grams
Body Temperature	100.5-102.2 degrees F
Rectal Temperature	102-103 degrees F
Respiratory Rate	45-80 per minutes
Heart rate	200-350 beats per minute
Dental	All teeth grow all the time throughout life. Incisors are yellow and grow 2.5-3 inches each year.
Dental formula	I 1/1 C0/0 P 1/1 M 3/3
Sexual maturity	7-10 months
Estrus cycle	30-50 days, seasonally polyestrous (Nov to May); postpartum estrus is fertile, spontaneous ovulation
Gestation	105-115 days
Birth weight	30-60 grams
Litter	2 average, can be up to 5
Newborns	Precocious, fully furred
Weaning	3-6 weeks
Feces	Slender, brown pellets 2-3 mm diameter, 5012 mm long

Health Care

It is recommended your chinchilla have an annual physical examination including dental examination. This also includes a review of the diet and husbandry. The need for fecal analysis, blood work, and possibly dental xrays would be determined on a case by case basis.

The most common problems seen in chinchillas are ring worm (fungal skin infections), trauma (broken bones, bite wounds), diarrhea or constipation, respiratory disorders, eye irritation/conjunctivitis, penile hair rings in males (paraphimosis), malocclusion and dental disease, heat stroke, esophageal choke, and GI stasis/bloat.

Signs of illness include wet fur particularly on lower jaw, matted or dirty fur, discharge from eyes or nose, feces/urine stuck to area around anus, lethargy, lack of appetite, weight loss, abnormal size of abdomen, lack of bowel movements (lack of fecal pellets) or urination, abnormal posture or reluctance to move. If your chinchilla shows any of these signs he/she needs to see a veterinarian as soon as possible.