

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

CARING FOR YOUR CHINCHILLA



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Chinchillas are attractive, sociable animals. They can live for 15 years or more in captivity, so choosing one as a pet is a long-term commitment.

Housing

Chinchillas bred in captivity are unable to withstand extremes of temperatures, so are best kept as indoor pets. Place the cage in a draught-free environment, well away from sunny windows.

As large, active animals, chinchillas need plenty of space. The minimum cage size for a pair is approximately 1m x 0.6m floor space and 1m tall with shelves at different heights. Your chinchillas should be allowed out for supervised exercise at least once a day. Chinchillas also need a bed to sleep in. As they tend to curl up to snooze, this does not need to be much bigger than the animal itself – a wooden box is ideal.



Introducing chinchillas

Chinchillas are social animals and need companionship – they prefer to live in pairs or groups. If males and females are housed together, the males will need to be neutered to prevent breeding.

To introduce a new chinchilla to your existing one, put them in separate cages side by side, with a space of about 8cms between them. This will enable them to see and smell each other, without physical contact. Put their beds at opposite ends of the cages so they each feel they have somewhere to ‘escape’ to. Give each chinchilla its own dust bath, but swap these over daily, so they get used to each other’s scent.

Over a week or so, move the cages and beds closer until the chinchillas are sleeping next to each other. It is important to introduce them slowly to avoid fights. When the two seem to be living happily side by side, place the existing chinchilla into the new chinchilla’s cage. Watch them carefully for a few hours – if there is serious fighting, separate them again for a few more days.

Exercise and training

Chinchillas are nocturnal, so will sleep most of the day. They are most active in the early evening and this is a good time to get them out for a run – although you need to be confident you can catch them again. Make sure they are supervised as they tend to explore everything with their teeth, including electrical wires.

Chinchillas can become very tame with a little time and training. Use raisins (a favourite treat) and offer them from your hand. When your chinchilla comes forward, stroke it gently under its chin. Don’t try to catch it the first time it does this, just give it the treat and let it go, so it doesn’t associate you with always being caught. Do take care, because a frightened chinchilla will stand on its back legs and spray urine in the face of any potential threat!

To pick up your chinchilla, support its whole body on your hand and gently restrain it by holding the base of its tail. Never pick a chinchilla up by its tail – this can cause pain and serious injury. A frightened chinchilla that is being too harshly restrained will shed handfuls of fur so, if this happens, you are being far too rough.

Feeding

Chinchillas are herbivores and in their native South America most of the vegetation is fibrous and dry. They eat grasses and other low-growing green stuff and chew the bark off trees.

Fortunately, there are specially prepared chinchilla foods available to buy in pet shops. The pellet type is best as with mixes your chinchilla may pick out its favourite bits, resulting in an unbalanced diet. These pellets are not sufficient on their own though; your chinchilla also needs a constant supply of good quality hay. Feed the hay in a small rack, and refill it each day.

The pellets you feed your chinchilla should be rationed, except for females that are pregnant and lactating or for very underweight animals. A healthy adult chinchilla needs about a heaped tablespoon of pellets each day.

Raisins and sultanas are ideal occasional treats. Some chinchillas will also enjoy small quantities of fresh vegetables, such as a slice of carrot.

Dental care

As with all rodents, chinchilla teeth grow continuously, so they need plenty of hard material to eat and chew on. Chewing toys such as a piece of apple wood or rodent toys from pet shops will help prevent dental problems.



Fur chewing

Fur chewing may be a sign of stress, boredom or poor diet. If you have just one chinchilla, you need to spend lots of time keeping it entertained through grooming, playing and handling.

Chinchillas that are not given hay may start to chew their own fur or that of their companion to make up for the lack of fibre in their diet. If you move house or move your chinchilla to a new location it may also result in stress-related fur chewing.

Whatever the underlying cause fur chewing is a difficult habit to break so prevention is better than cure.

Dust baths

Chinchilla fur is dense and luxurious and requires specialist care. Fortunately, your chinchilla is able to provide this for itself as long as you supply a dust bath – chinchilla dust can be purchased from most pet shops. In the wild, chinchillas use very fine sand to keep their coats clean and in good condition. The bath needs to be about 25cms deep and large enough for your chinchilla to roll around in without injuring itself. The dust should be about 10cms deep. Your chinchilla should be offered a bath once a day, for about 20 minutes. If it is left longer than this, it may become soiled and your chinchilla will not want to use it. Change the dust at least once a week.

If your chinchilla is quite tame, you may want to give the bath outside the cage, but be aware it does make a mess!

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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All About Pets, The Blue Cross
FREEPOST NAT4336, BURFORD OX18 4BR
www.allaboutpets.org.uk

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