

Chinchilla Care

All Creatures Animal Hospital

Newsletter Date

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Special points of interest:

- Keep in a clean safe cage when not supervised.
- Feed hay, limited pellets, and high fiber vegetables.
- Annual checkups.
- Handle carefully.
- Chinchillas exhibiting anorexia, weight loss, reduction of stool volume and numbers, or abdominal pain should be seen by your veterinarian immediately.

Housing

The chinchilla (*Chinchilla laniger*) is a rodent originally from the Andes Mountain area of South America. In the wild, chinchillas live at high altitudes in rocky, barren mountainous regions. They were originally domesticated in 1923 for the fur industry but has now become a popular pet. Females are larger than males. The average life span of chinchillas is 10 years. Chinchillas also tend to be nocturnal (active in the evening hours).

Chinchillas tend to be fairly clean, odorless and friendly pets. They are usually shy and easily frightened so are not good pets for young

children. They are agile, active creatures and they require significant exercise. At least four square feet of floor space as well as some vertical space for climbing should be available for each chinchilla. It is best to keep them on wire or on fresh clean beddings such as wood shavings or recycled paper litter. Wire cages are preferred to those with solid sides because the ventilation is better. Cages should be cleaned and sanitized at least once weekly. Bleach diluted 1:32 makes an excellent disinfectant if used after cleaning and rinsed off well.

Chinchillas should be kept in

an area that is well ventilated and kept cool and dry. They do not tolerate high temperatures and should be kept at 65-72 degrees. Temperatures over 76 degrees can result in heat stroke. Likewise the humidity must not be too high or low; 30-50% humidity is recommended.

When overcrowded, chinchillas may chew the hair of others (barbering). In general, pet chinchillas are not highly social and should be kept singly. Females tend to be more aggressive than males.

Veterinary Care

In order to maintain the health of chinchillas, it is important to determine the presence of any problems. Since they are adept at masking the signs of illness, regular examinations are a valuable addition to preventative care.

New chinchillas should be examined soon after they enter the home. At this time the veterinarian can establish

the current health of the chinchilla and give recommendations for husbandry. After this initial examination annual examinations should be maintained to monitor for early problems. Problems detected early can often be treated much more easily and effectively.

Some chinchillas will require

filing of the rear teeth periodically. This procedure is painless but requires immobility. Isoflurane, a very safe anesthetic gas, is administered to the chinchilla by a face mask until sleeping. The mouth is then opened and any sharp hooks on the teeth are filed. This can prevent mouth sores and other problems from occurring.

Diet

There are complete pelleted diets specifically formulated for chinchillas, but if these are not available, rabbit or guinea pig pellets can be used. These diets were developed for chinchillas that were used in the pelt industry. The diets support maximum growth rates, but probably are not ideal for longevity, gut function and overall health. The chinchilla's intestinal tract is highly specialized for digesting fiber. When inadequate fiber is given, the motility is reduced, the wrong types of bacterial flora proliferate, and toxins

may be produced. Impactions, diarrhea, toxemia, and other disorders may result from the excessive feeding of grains (i.e. pellets). Additionally, pellets have higher levels of protein and calcium than is necessary for adults. While a growing baby may be fed as much as it wants, it is advisable to limit the pellets of adults. Adults should be given about 2 table-spoons of pellets daily. In addition to the pellets, high quality grass hay, such as timothy, should be given ad libitum (as much as they want). Grass hay is

preferred to alfalfa since it is lower in protein and calcium. Chopped vegetables and fruit in roughly the same quantities as the pellets will provide the remainder of the diet. Food should be offered in a dish suspended an inch or two above the bedding. Food offered on the bottom of the cage may be soiled by droppings or urine. Water should always be available in sipper tubes and should be changed daily.

Handling

Chinchillas are not very difficult to handle and rarely bite. The proper method of handling chinchillas involves picking them up by the base of the tail (close to the body) with one hand while rapidly placing them across a forearm and against your body. Chinchillas can also be held around the thorax as done with other rodents. They are generally docile, but are very quick. Be careful when handling them, however, due to the risk

of "fur slip" (see Skin Disorders). Although they rarely bite, they are still capable if agitated enough. However, they are more likely to urinate when annoyed. They do not prefer to be held for long periods of time and enjoy running and jumping.

Careful handling is required to reduce the risk of "fur slip"

Coat Care

The beautiful coat of the chinchilla is the original purpose for the domestication of the chinchilla. Unfortunately, this coat is relatively delicate and easily loses its attractive appearance. In high humidity, the coat will start to matt and look poorly groomed. Also, if the chinchilla is handled roughly or by the scruff of the neck, it will drop large clumps of hair (fur slip).

The maintenance of the coat also requires regular (1-2 times weekly) dust baths. "Chinchilla dust" (finely powdered volcanic ash) is used to keep the fur clean and well groomed. It can be purchased at most pet stores. The dust is placed in a container of sufficient size to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it.

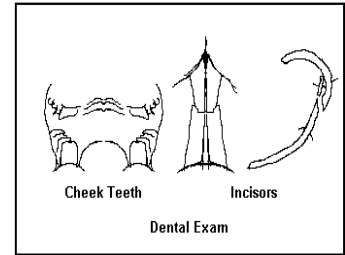
Dental Disease

Dental Disease (malocclusion) usually occurs in older chinchillas (3-4 years of age). Molar malocclusion leads to abnormal wear and sharp painful points on the molars. The lower teeth angle inwards towards the tongue and the upper teeth angle outward toward the cheek and overgrowth causes spurs that puncture the tongue or cheek mucosa. Affected chinchillas will exhibit excessive drooling, reduced appetite, weight loss, inability to hold food (picks

up the food and then drops it), and other signs of pain. Incisor malocclusion and root impactions can also occur with similar signs. However, please note that the normal length of the lower incisors is 3 times the length of the upper incisors.

If your chinchilla is exhibiting any of the signs listed above, we recommend you see your vet **immediately**. Treatment of malocclusion usually requires trimming the affected teeth under anesthesia as

well as antibiotics, analgesics (pain relief), fluids and nutritional support. There is no permanent solution or correction to this problem. Regular rechecks are required to prevent reoccurrence and periodic trimming is usually necessary.



Gastrointestinal Disease

A chinchilla will lose its appetite for a variety of reasons. The most common cause is pain. While dental disease (discussed separately) and gastrointestinal (GI) disease are the most common causes of pain, pain anywhere in the body can be associated with loss of appetite (anorexia). Other conditions that can lead to anorexia include bladder and kidney infections, uterine infections, abscesses, respiratory infections, inner and middle ear infections, strokes, parasitic diseases, and toxin exposure.

The problem is primarily a GI motility disorder, which is common in all of the hindgut fermenters. A high fiber diet is essential to the health of the GI tract. A low fiber diet, small particle diet (pellets

as an exclusive diet), excessive carbohydrates (fruits, nuts, grains), reduced water intake, lack of exercise, or any medical condition that causes the chinchilla to eat or drink less may result in reduced motility of the GI tract. When this happens, the stomach contents start to dehydrate and compact. Reduced GI motility also leads to accumulation of gas and toxins and can start to compromise the blood flow to the intestinal tract. The less the chinchilla eats or drinks, the more compacted the contents become until the chinchilla stops eating entirely. When the chinchilla stops eating, the intestinal tract stops moving and the problem escalates. Since chinchillas cannot vomit, affected chinchilla will exhibit anorexia, weight loss, reduction

in stool volume and numbers, and abdominal pain. A chinchilla with these signs should be seen by your veterinarian **immediately**. Chinchillas will deteriorate rapidly when they go without food for extended periods of time. Early diagnosis and treatment is essential to saving your pet's life.

Your veterinarian may require radiographs and blood work to efficiently evaluate the chinchilla's condition. Medical therapy may include fluid therapy, forced feedings, medications to stimulate GI motility, and pain relief. Depending on the severity of the disease, your chinchilla may need to stay in the hospital for treatments until its condition is stabilized.

Upper Respiratory Infections

Pneumonia and other respiratory infections, caused by *Bordetella*, *Streptococcus*, *Pasteurella*, and *Pseudomonas*, are common in chinchillas. Clinical signs include ocular or nasal discharge, sneezing, wheezing, dyspnea (difficulty breathing), anorexia, and pyrexia (fever). Occasionally, middle or inner ear infections accompany respiratory disease in chinchillas.

Additional signs would include incoordination, head tilt, circling to one side, and rolling. Your veterinarian may require blood work and/or radiographs to fully evaluate the condition of your chinchilla. Treatment includes aggressive antibiotic therapy and supportive care.

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Our Mission

All Creatures Animal Hospital is dedicated to providing progressive medicine in a caring environment for pets of all species. Through preventative medicine, client education, professional development of our staff, and advanced medical and surgical techniques, we hope to foster a strong and lasting bond with clients and their pets.

Skin Diseases

Hair loss or thinning can occur for a number of reasons. Barbering (one chinchilla chews on its own or another chinchilla's fur that is lower in the social pecking order), skin parasites, and fungal infections can all cause hair loss in chinchilla. The only "treatment" for barbering is to separate the chinchillas and providing various chew toys.

Fungal infections, such as ringworm, can also occur in chinchillas. They present with similar signs of hair loss and scabby red lesions on the nose, feet, and around the eyes. Ringworm is diagnosed by culture and treated with oral antifungals. All litter should be discarded and all bedding and furniture should be thoroughly cleaned weekly during treatments.

Fur slip is a condition that occurs when chinchillas are handled roughly. Large clumps of fur come out with relative ease. This is a defensive mechanism that allows the chinchilla to escape from predators. The hair generally grows back without difficulty, but it may take several months.

Penile hair rings occur usually in breeding animals. The hair is woven into a string and encircles the penis. This results in disruption of circulation. The penis swells and eventually becomes necrotic. Signs include constant licking in the perianal area, trouble urinating, and depression. Diagnosis is based on direct visualization. Treatment involves removal of the ring of hair, topical and systemic antibiotic therapy, and breeding rest.