

Chinchilla basics

Often playful and full of energy, chinchillas are quickly becoming a popular pet in the United States. With a tail resembling that of a squirrel, chubby cheeks, and mouse-like ears, chinchillas typically are loving pets who can bond closely with their pet parents.

Chinchillas, who are members of the rodent family, are nocturnal creatures that generally live 15 years. Still, with the right care and attention, it's possible for your chinchilla to live into her late teens.

Chinchilla Digs

A chinchilla needs plenty of room to relax, to explore, and to play. Make sure you get the biggest cage possible. Those cages sold at pet stores that claim they are perfect for small animals and dwarf rabbits are not, in actuality, big enough to house your chinchilla. Many chinchilla parents opt for multi-level cages that allow their climbing-loving chinchillas to climb to different levels. The more room your chinchilla has, the happier she will be.

If you opt for a large cage, make sure it doesn't have wire flooring as it's hard on, and can hurt, your chinchilla's feet. Your chinchilla also needs bedding in the cage. The best type of bedding is wood shavings, such as aspen. Steer clear of cedar shavings, as they have been proven to be detrimental to the health of small animals.

Your chinchilla's cage should be equipped with a food bowl, a hay bowl, and a water bowl or water bottle. Because chinchillas love to chew, you may want to opt for ceramic or glass items. Don't forget to give your chinchilla plenty of toys in her cage. You may also want to include a large wheel that allows her to get exercise when she's not out free during playtime.

Chinchillas also crave a place where they can hide. You can purchase plastic tubing or even put a cardboard box in your chinchilla's cage, where she can retreat when she wants to get away from it all.

Playtime

Chinchillas also need time out of their cages to roam around, to exercise, and to play. If you're going to allow your chinchilla to run around outside of her cage, you must chinchilla-proof your home. Chinchillas love to chew, so if you can't put all wires and cords out of reach of your chinchilla, take care to cover them with tubing that you can find at your local home improvement store.

Your chinchilla will need plenty to chew because her teeth are constantly growing. Chewing helps keep a chinchilla's teeth short. Provide your chinchilla with plenty to chew, both inside of her cage and when she's out for playtime. Untreated wooden toys and branches, from such trees as willow and apple, are ideal chew toys.

What's for dinner?

Chinchillas, like house rabbits, need plenty of fresh, high-quality, Timothy or grass hay. Make sure your chinchilla has unlimited access to hay, so she can munch on it whenever she's hungry. Hay is essential to helping prevent teething and gastrointestinal problems in your chinchilla.

In addition to hay, another staple of the chinchilla's diet is pellets. Veterinarians generally suggest feeding a chinchilla between one and two tablespoons of pellets per day. Oxbow offers both hay and high-quality pellets specifically designed for chinchillas. If you're not sure what type of hay or pellets are best for your chinchilla, talk with your vet.

In addition to hay and pellets, your chinchilla will enjoy vegetable treats, such as romaine lettuce, dandelion greens, and red leaf lettuce. Chinchillas can also eat herbs, including cilantro, basil, and thyme. To avoid any gastrointestinal problems, do not feed your chinchilla more than a half a cup of herbs and/or vegetables each day. Avoid those vegetables, like broccoli, that can cause gas in your chinchilla.

Ah, a dust bath

Chinchilla need regular dust baths to keep their coats healthy and clean. You can purchase chinchilla dust at your local pet store. Be sure you only use store-bought chinchilla dust as it is best for your chinchilla. Generally you should allow your chinchilla to have a dust bath a few times a week. However, when it's humid out, she'll need to have the dust bath more often. Give your chinchilla at least between 10 and 15 minutes in the dust bath.

You'll need a container in which your chinchilla can have her dust bath. Make sure the container is a bit bigger than your chinchilla. She'll need just enough room to roll around in the dust.