

## Basic Information on **Chinchillas**

### History

The chinchilla, *Chinchilla lanigera*, is a native of the Andes region of South America. In the early part of the 20th Century, skins were shipped to Europe and the United States. Chile alone shipped over 435,000 pelts in 1899. This "fur craze" almost led to the extinction of the animal. Mathias F. Chapman, a United States mining engineer caught 11 animals and shipped them to the United States in 1923. These became the foundation stock for chinchilla farming in America.

### General Characteristics

Chinchillas live 10 - 15 years. They are nocturnal (most active at night). They are clean and odorless. The density of their fur does not allow fleas or any other parasite to live on their bodies. Microscopic examination of an individual hair follicle reveals that it is composed of 80 to 100 hairs. Their fur is incredibly soft. The original fur color was mottled yellow-gray. Through selective breeding many other colors (ebony, silver, black velvet, etc.) are now available.

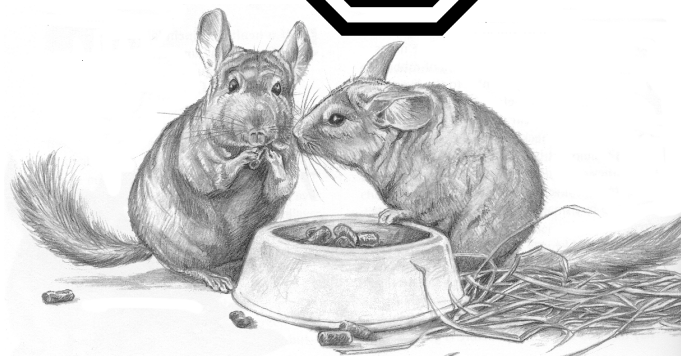
### Feeding chinchillas

Chinchillas come from an arid region. Foods available there consist of dried plants, grasses and seeds. It's easy to see why chinchillas have such a nutrient-poor diet with lots of roughage. A good diet usually consists of 4 parts

1. Pellets
2. Hay
3. Treats & Supplements
4. Water - changed daily with vitamins

Pellets should be a high quality commercial chinchilla pellet. **Rabbit or guinea pigs pellets are not substitutes!** An adult chinchilla will eat about two tablespoons of pellets per day. Feed once or twice a day. Chinchillas need routine and may be stressed by changes in their feeding schedule.

Always feed the same brand of pellet. Different brands have different formulas. Since chinchillas have a sensitive digestive system, abrupt changes can result in diarrhea. If your regular brand of pellet is not available, gradually mix in the new brand with the old pellets, increasing the quantity (mixed in) over time.



Use a heavy ceramic dish as a feeding dish. Ceramics are less likely to be chewed and do not tip over as easily as plastic.

### Hay

Hay provides the fiber that chinchillas need for good health. Your pet will take their hay (alfalfa or timothy) loose or in small blocks. An adult will eat about a handful of loose hay or one pressed cube each day.

### Treats

Like all pets, chinchillas love treats. **BE CAREFUL!** too many treats can cause diarrhea. The most cherished treats are raisins. Moderation is the key. Only three or four raisins a week for adults and less for babies. Other treats can include apple (about the size of a sugar cube), orange bits, 1/2 grape, a blueberry, a celery slice or carrot slice. Sunflower seeds are great treats. The oil enhances the sheen of their coat. Your pet may eat just the inside of the seed or the entire package. Don't worry, it's just a bit more roughage. Corn, cabbage, and lettuce are OUT! These vegetables cause gas and are very hard on the digestive system.

Do not give baby chinchillas treats until after they are 4 months old. Their digestive system is not developed and **any treat** can cause diarrhea. When they reach 4 months of age give half the adult amount and gradually increase to adult quantities.

### Chewing

Chinchillas chew! Like all rodents, their teeth need to be worn down. Give blocks of wood as a chewing aid. Anything made of untreated pine works well. Look for wooden hiding boxes or hamster chew blocks to help satisfy this need.

### Selecting your pet

First observe your pet. Is it alert and interested, or dull and listless? Make sure it's eyes are bright and shiny.

Check it's mouth. Make sure the top teeth are not overlapping the bottom ones, and both sets are fairly straight. Watch the animal eat. The chinchilla should not paw at it's mouth when eating. Make sure it's chin is not wet. Teeth problems are a major threat to a chinchilla's well-being.

### **Grooming and bathing**

Chinchillas hate water, but they love to bathe. They use a finely ground powder called "chinchilla dust". Put about 2 inches in a shallow tub and watch your chinchilla go! Five minutes is sufficient. Do not leave it in the cage - your pet might use it as a potty and just throw it around. Offer a bath twice a week when the weather is humid.

### **Heat Stroke**

The chinchilla comfort zone is 65°F to 80°F. Humidity should be around 30 - 40%. Remember chinchillas cannot take off their fur coat and they do not perspire. If you are uncomfortable then your pet is in danger!

**Tip:** Find the temperature and the humidity percent. Add the numbers together. If the sum is larger than 150, then your pet is in danger of heat stroke.

### **Cage**

The chinchilla home should be at least 24" x 24" x 18". Chinchillas need some running room. Two story cages are nice. Be sure to incorporate shelves, hideaway houses, toys and a wheel. The bottom can be wire or solid. Waste falls through wire - your pet does not have to stand or sleep in soiled bedding. If the bottom is wire then make sure your pet has a wood plank or shelf to stand on when they tire of standing on the wire. Chinchillas can develop sores on their feet from continued contact with wire bottoms. Make sure the bottom wire is no larger than 1/2" x 1/2". If the openings are larger, their feet can slip through causing nasty breaks and bruises.

### **Toys**

Chinchillas love to chew and they love the sound of a bell. Large parrot toys usually include blocks of wood with bells. These can conveniently be hung all around your pet's cage. Chinchillas also love small toys they can carry around in their mouths. Try whiffle balls or other small toys.

### **Exercise**

Chinchillas need exercise. A wheel can provide exercise and entertainment for your pet. Chinchilla wheels need to be solid all the way around. Small chinchilla feet can get caught in mesh or wire wheels making them unsuitable.

Some owners "baby proof" a small room or large closet

and allow their pets to run free and ricochet off walls. Be sure toilet seats are down, garbage cans are covered, and no electrical cords are exposed. Even though the room looks safe - always supervise "free time". Spread your pet's toys around in the room. Chinchillas love to explore!

### **Bringing your pet home**

Your pet needs time to get to know you. Leave your pet alone for the first 24 hours. This gives it time to acclimate to it's new environment. Always move slowly and speak softly around your pet. Start the taming process in the evening when your pet is most active. Here are a few basic steps:

1. Start by sitting quietly next to the cage.
2. Offer your pet 1/2 of a raisin when it approaches the bars of it's cage.
3. Once it takes the raisin from your hand, try offering it through an open door.
4. Once it takes it through an open door, try placing the raisin on your hand to encourage him to step up on your hand.
5. After it steps up on your hand, place the raisin further back on your arm.
6. After your pet is comfortable climbing on your arm, try petting it's back.

**The proper way to pick up a chinchilla** is to grasp it by the base of the tail with one hand and sliding your other hand under the feet cupping the animal

**Avoid chasing and grabbing your pet around it's ribcage.** Chinchillas have very delicate rib cages. Grabbing your pet could result in broken or cracked ribs.

**Handle your pet regularly.** This keeps your pet socialized.

**Use treats and work in small steps.** This give your pet time to get used to your presence.

### **Vet Care**

Chinchillas are hardy and rarely become ill. Most health problems can be avoided with proper diet and clean, adequate housing. Some signs of illness are listlessness, refusal to eat, watery eyes, and loose or no droppings. Illness can be difficult to diagnose and you should seek veterinary care.

**Please Note:** The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only. There are several good books available on the care of chinchillas.

B&B Pet Stop, Inc. 2003