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How to Raise a Healthy Chinchilla

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Chinchillas are nocturnal animals that sleep during the day and are very active at night. Also, chinchillas are herbivores (vegetarians). Chinchilla young are called “kits”. The gestation period of the chinchilla is 111 days and the female can bear as many as three litters in one year. The average litter size is two or three kits to the litter, but a chinchilla can birth four kits at a time. Chinchillas are very clean and odorless. They love to chew.

Food and Water

Water: Offer fresh clean water at all times! Wash the water bottles in a dishwasher weekly. Clean the inside of bottles, tubes, and stoppers daily. Be aware that baby chinchillas can drown in water bowls, so bottles with tubes are usually recommended. Give your chinchilla time to learn to use a bottle if it came from place that used automatic watering systems or any other kind of watering source. Hang bottles in such a way that the chinchilla cannot chew the bottle or the cap. Chinchillas drink about 2 ounces of water a day, but it varies with age and pregnancy.

Pellets: DON'T USE RABBIT PELLETS!!!! Feed an unlimited amount of fresh clean chinchilla pellets. The most readily available quality feeds are Purina's Mazuri Chinchilla Pellet and Hubbard's Traditional. Do not use feed that is over three months old, as its nutritional value begins to drop after this time. Freeze any portion that won't be used immediately. Chinchillas eat an average of two tablespoons of high quality pellets per day, but this amount can vary. Do not feed chinchillas lettuce or other vegetables.

Hay: Feed fresh clean grass hay, like Timothy or Bermuda grass. Make sure the hay is free of mold and any other contaminants. Store the hay off the ground in a cool dry place that rodents cannot get to. Contamination by rats and mice is the primary source of chinchilla diseases. Chinchillas should have loose hay available at all times. Alfalfa, clover, vetch, and other legume hays are not advisable. Legume hays are much too high in protein for a regular part of the chinchilla's diet. Grass hay is readily available and very inexpensive.

Treats: If treats are fed, they should be done so sparingly. Acceptable treats are:

- 1-2 raisins/ day
- 1-2 sunflower seeds/ day
- 1-2 banana chips / day
- 1 small piece of dried papaya/ day
- 1 very small slice of apple / day
- 1 dried cranberry/ day
- Or treats can be in the form of a mixture. There are commercial treats in pet stores that contain seeds and fruits. If you choose to buy pre-made treats, make sure they are made especially for chinchillas.
- Or you can make one of these recipes from ingredients purchased at your local health food store. Feed no more than 2 teaspoons per day. Put the treats in a separate bowl from the pellets. Freeze the remainder:

Recipe #1

2 lbs. rolled oats
1 lb. barley flakes
1 lb. cracked wheat
1lb. red wheat bran
1lb. wheat germ
1 lb. flax seed
¼ lb. shelled unsalted raw sunflower seeds

Recipe #2

3 lbs. rolled oats
1 ½ lbs. red wheat bran
1 lb. rolled wheat
1 lb. rolled barley
1 lb. wheat germ
½ lb. flax seed
¼ lb. shelled unsalted raw sunflower seeds

Housing

There have been several caging methods for the chinchilla that have been proven safe and cost effective. Pet chinchillas have done best in the following environment.

- The absolute minimum amount of space per chinchilla pair should be 2ft x 2 ft x 3 ft. 12 and 14 gauge 3 " x ½ " aviary wire can be used to make self-supporting cages, and ½" x ½" or ½ " by 1 " wire can be used with a frame. Some commercial ferret cages may also be suitable for chinchillas.
- Wood frames are not advisable because they cannot be sterilized in the case of sickness or an outbreak of fungus, it is difficult to remove the scent from the wood when adding new occupants to a cage, and chinchillas like to chew the wood.
- Baby chinchillas can get out of any wire size larger than those listed above. If only adult chinchillas are going to be kept, 1" x 1" wire is sufficient. Wire bottom cages are not advisable for chinchillas because they are uncomfortable for the animal.
- A solid bottom cage with untreated white pine shavings, newspaper or other paper litter is the best flooring. Shavings purchase from a (horse) feed store are considerably less expensive than shavings from pet stores. Remember to ask for untreated white pine shavings only!
- **Do not use cedar or redwood shavings in a chinchilla cages.** Cedar, Redwood, Eucalyptus, and some other hardwoods are highly toxic to chinchillas. Also make sure that if you use wood inside the cage, for shavings or boxes, that you use only untreated white pine.
- **Do not use plywood as the adhesive glues can be toxic.**

- There should be one hiding place per chinchilla so that each has a retreat from more aggressive cohabitants.
- Chinchillas like shelves in their cages, and tend to spend most of their time at the highest spot possible. It is not advisable to make shelves out of wire, because there have been countless incidents of chinchillas getting broken back legs from them. The chinchilla has a large back foot that easily slips down into the wire, and when the leg is then turned sideways, the foot is caught!
- Be sure that either the cage is up high, or there is a solid partition above the cage. Chinchillas become especially frightened by movement above their heads, because their most common natural enemy is the bird of prey.
- Never house a chinchilla in an aquarium or any other cage with glass or plexi-glass siding.

Environment

Keep the chinchilla cage out of direct sunlight, out of heavy drafts, and in a quiet cool spot. They are primarily nocturnal, being most active at dawn and dusk. They need to be kept quiet during the day, but be aware that they can keep you up at night, so bedrooms are not a good place to keep chinchillas. They should also be kept away from any area with a high humidity level and away from moisture. Most importantly, keep chinchillas out of the heat and direct sunlight. Heat is the biggest killer of chinchillas. 80 degrees Fahrenheit is the absolute maximum temperature they can stand. Use a reliable thermometer to monitor the temperature. On the other end of the scale, they should be kept above 40 degrees Fahrenheit. It is better if they are kept warmer than this. A little above 79 degrees is far more dangerous than a little below 40 degrees, however.

The exercise wheel is probably the chinchilla's favorite cage feature. A 14" or bigger wheel made of chinchillas is suitable. The 12" size is common, but tends to be too small for many chinchillas. Make sure to leave at least 3" clearance on all sides of the wheel. Make sure if the wheel is made of wire, that it is ½ "x ½" or smaller or you run into the same "caught foot problem" that occurs with wire shelving.

Handling

Never pick a chinchilla up by the end of the tail. Instead, scoop up your chinchilla directly with your hand under its belly. Once you have it in your arms, try to relax, and hold the chin close to you and support its feet. When your chinchilla first comes home it may need some time to adjust to its new cage and surroundings. Some chinchillas make themselves right at home whereas others may be scared and hid at first. I usually recommend giving your chinchilla week or so to get used to the new sounds, smells, and sights in its new home. Once you feel your new chin is starting to adjust you can try placing your hand in the cage and let your new chin come to you. Also chins get used to a routine, so feeding, dusting and playtime should be about the same time every day. Never chase your chinchilla. This could cause them to fear you and they will be scared. When they learn to trust you, they will climb on you and let you pet them and they will come to you to look for treats.

Chinchillas vary distinctly in temperament, and this should be taken into consideration when they are handled or purchased. No amount of handling will make a mean or high- strung chinchilla pleasant. Breeding ill-tempered chinchillas to a good-tempered mate also does not insure good temperament in the offspring. You get what you start with to a large degree. Temperament is more apparent in older chinchillas and less

easily assessed in kits. If you see a lot of standing up and chirping, mouth opened wide, or spraying by the females, this is a sign you are not off to a good start.

Some chinchillas will sit quietly when held if you support their back legs in one hand. Then support their front feet slightly higher than the back with the other hand. They feel safer held up against you than with your hands outstretched. If they are frightened when you are holding them they might slip their fur, or lose an area of fur down to the skin, as a defense mechanism. They might also bite if hurt or extremely frightened. Be careful not to squeeze them too tightly because their ribs are very easily broken. Young children should be supervised very closely when allowed to handle a chinchilla. It is common to have fingers bitten when children and adults stick their fingers through the cage wire and the chinchillas mistake this for an offering of food.

Dust Baths

Never put your chinchilla in the water! They don't get water baths they get dust baths. Chinchillas should be given chinchilla dust to roll in at least twice a week. This is a fine powder that mimics the volcanic ash of their native environment. Oil and dirt sticks to the dust, and is thus removed from the chinchilla when the dust particles fall out of the fur. Dust can be left in the cage at all times or for a few minutes several times a week. Chinchillas will urinate and defecate in the dust bath container if it is left in the cage at all times, so it will need to be changed more often if this is done. The dust particles are also very fine, and will get into an indoor ventilation system. If the chinchillas are being kept in a human dwelling, the air handling system will need to have a filter that is changed often. It is not advisable to sift your dust or use it on multiple animals since this practice can enhance the spread of fungus. Blue Sparkle chinchilla dust is readily available in the eastern half of the United States. Blue Cloud is the better, but more expensive brand of chinchilla dust, however is more difficult to find on the east coast.

Health Problems

Ringworm: One of the most common afflictions of the chinchilla is usually referred to as "fungus." The skin fungus that usually afflicts the chinchilla is a strain of ringworm, also found on dogs, cats, and many other animals including humans. Avoid buying animals that are showing outward signs of fungus. It is very contagious to other chinchillas, and potentially dogs, cats and HUMANS and hard to get rid of completely. Fungus usually first appears as a bald spot around the nose or eyes, and then commonly spreads to the front feet or genitals next, or to the body. Fungus causes uncomfortable red itchy spots, and a loss of fur in the afflicted area. If a chinchilla gets fungus, take its dust away until the fungus is cleared up or the sores will spread to other animals through the dust. If your chinchilla is showing signs of a fungal infection, call your veterinarian immediately for the animal to be evaluated and treated. The cage must be sterilized thoroughly. This is a situation where wood cages might have to go altogether. Ringworm spores are hard to kill and can live for a long time in the environment. Fungus tends to appear most often when the animal is stressed, like after shipping or weaning. Some animals seem to be more susceptible to fungus than others. Baby animals of all species tend to be vulnerable, especially at the time of weaning. Also, some chinchillas can have the fungus systemically, in which case a topical medication is not effective. In systemic cases, an internal medication can effectively treat the fungus. These medications should only be used when prescribed by your veterinarian.

Malocclusion of the teeth: Malocclusion is when the teeth don't line up properly. This can lead to overgrown teeth, anorexia, and can be lethal for an affected chinchilla. Malocclusion can involve the front or the back teeth. If your chinchilla has this problem, your veterinarian can trim the teeth periodically so that the animals can continue to eat comfortably. Signs of malocclusion are anorexia (the chinchilla may stop eating), one or both eyes may look wet, or the chinchilla may drool or have a wet lower jaw. Malocclusion is hereditary. Although breeders cannot guarantee fully that their animals will never malocclude, they should be sure that it is not in the background of the animal. Most chinchillas that are going to malocclude will do so by the age of three, but it can show up as late as 5 years of age.

Fur Chewing: Fur chewing, like malocclusion, tends to be hereditary. It can also have an environmental influence. Fur chewers will chew their own fur either constantly, or at intervals, re-growing it completely in between. They usually chew the fur off of their hips and sides about half-way down the length of the hair. They will also chew the fur of other chinchillas and their offspring. Fur chewing must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, as it can also be the fault of poor husbandry, poor feeding, or stress caused by the chinchilla's environment.

Fur Slip: Chinchillas have the ability to release or "slip" patches of fur when handled roughly, when stressed, or when fighting. No permanent damage is usually done to the chinchilla. The fur usually re-grows, although the new growth takes several months.

Antibiotic Sensitivity: Rodents are very susceptible to antibiotic toxicity. Human antibiotics, including penicillin and erythromycin, can be fatal to pet chinchillas. For this reason, owners should never give their pet chinchillas medications without checking with their veterinarian first.

Intestinal Parasites: Like all pets, pet chinchillas should be examined annually and have their feces tested for parasites during the annual visit.

Vaccinations: Pet chinchillas do not need annual vaccinations.

Recommended Books and Websites

1. *All About Chinchillas* by Karen Zeinert
2. *Chinchillas (A Complete Pet Owner's Manual)* by Maike Roder-Thiede
3. *The Joy of Chinchillas* by Lani Ritchey BSc. AS, Elizabeth Current Cogswell RN MS PHN, and Roxane Beeman
4. <http://www.chinchillas.com>

Please call the office if you have a question or problem. Above all, enjoy your pet, give him or her your love and affection; they deserve it and will repay you with years of companionship and enjoyment.