



# Introduction to Chinchilla Care

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Chinchillas originate from South America. They live on the western slope of the Andes Mountains in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina where the environment is dry, windy, and cool. They are social animals living in colonies among the rock falls of the mountain slopes. Domestic chinchillas are wonderful pets!

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## Behavior

Chinchillas are nocturnal animals but can be active during the day. They are very fast and agile. They like to play and can jump high (up to 5 feet)! Chinchillas will learn to urinate only in their enclosure, however, it is difficult for them to learn to defecate only in their enclosure or a litter box.

## Handling

Chinchillas are very active, agile animals. When handling a chinchilla, be sure to secure her so that she cannot leap out of your hands and fall to the floor. Always support your chinchilla with two hands. Place one hand underneath her body and use your other hand to hold her close to you.

## Diet

A chinchilla's diet consists of hay and pelleted food. It is best to purchase high-quality pelleted food specifically for chinchillas. Place a handful or approximately 1 oz of pelleted food in your Chinchilla's bowl each day. We recommend Oxbow Chinchilla Deluxe pellets. These are available at some pet stores, and [oxbowanimalhealth.com](http://oxbowanimalhealth.com).



Heavy ceramic food bowls are best for chinchillas because they are difficult for your chin to flip over. They are also chew-proof (unlike plastic bowls), and they are easy to clean.

Chinchillas should have fresh timothy hay available at all times. Avoid legume hays such as alfalfa which are higher in calories and lower in fiber. Choose hay that smells sweet, is green in color, has few stems, and is free of dust, mud, mold, and insects. Oxbow Animal Health makes high-quality timothy hay. We always have some on hand for purchase at our hospitals.

Hay and pellets should be changed daily. Remove all hay and/or pellets that have become wet. This will prevent mold from developing, which can be toxic and dangerous for your chin. Any hay or pellets contaminated with fecal material should also be removed daily. Be sure that your chin's hay and pellets are free of insecticides.

Treats can be given to chinchillas to supplement their diet and create a loving bond between you and your pet. Treats should only be given in small portions not to exceed 1 teaspoon per day. Treats may include dried fruits (like raisins), green vegetables, carrot, and baked timothy-hay-based treats such as those made by Oxbow Animal Health.

Your chinchilla should have access to water at all times. Be sure to offer water in a heavy ceramic bowl or water bottle to avoid spilling. Change the water daily to keep it fresh.

Pregnant or breeding chinchillas should be supplemented with 30–60 mg of Vitamin E daily.

## Housing

Chinchillas need a large enclosure that provides plenty of room for exercise and has platforms or ledges at different levels. Chins love to leap from one platform to another. The Midwest Critter Nation cage is a good choice. Pet stores sell wooden ledges that can be attached to most wire cages. The caging should be durable and easy to clean. High sides and a secure top will help to keep your chinchilla from escaping, as they can jump as high as 5 feet! Caging should be cleaned at least once a week, or more frequently. Chinchillas like to sleep in enclosed areas, so a separate hiding house for sleeping should be placed in the enclosure.

## Dust Baths & Enrichment

Offer your chinchilla a dust bath a few times each week. Watching a chinchilla enjoy a dust bath is lots of fun – they love it! Pet stores sell plastic or ceramic dust bath "houses" for chinchillas. It is important not to leave the dust bath in the enclosure all day. Over-bathing can cause particles to become lodged in the eye resulting in an infection. Ideally, the dust in the box should be at least 2" deep. Blue Cloud chinchilla dust or 9 parts Silver Sand and 1 part Fuller's Earth may be used in the dust bath. The dust should be changed once weekly.

Provide various toys to entertain your chinchilla when she is alone. Cardboard oatmeal canisters, paper towel rolls, and wooden chew toys are some good options. You can also hang durable toys made of wood and rope for parrots in the cage. Frequently change the toys you offer to prevent your chin from getting bored.

## Heatstroke

Chinchillas have very dense fur designed for living in cooler climates. It is important to keep in mind that summer weather which feels comfortable for you might be too hot for them. When the temperature climbs into the upper 70's and higher, it's time to think about cooling off your chin. One way to do this is to place blocks of ice in the cage (soda bottles filled with frozen water work well).

A fan or **air conditioner** in the chinchilla's room is the best way to bring down the temperature. Be sure that the fan or air conditioner is not blowing directly on your chin's cage. Another option is to move your chinchilla to a cool basement on very hot days.

If you notice signs of heatstroke, wrap your chin in a cool (not cold) wet towel and call us immediately:

- Rapid breathing
- Bright red ears
- Lethargy/lying on her side
- Thick/stringy saliva
- Diarrhea

Heatstroke is a very serious condition that can quickly lead to death. Seek help right away!

## Signs of Disease

Call us if you notice any of the following signs of disease:

- Lack of appetite
- Eye squinting or discharge
- Fur loss
- Dry skin
- Loose stools
- Trouble breathing
- Trauma to any part of the body

Dental disease is common in chinchillas. If not addressed early on, this can lead to serious health issues. Many chins with bad teeth become dangerously thin because they experience pain when chewing. If you notice that your chin has a wet face, chest, or forepaws, she may need to have her teeth checked for a possible tooth trim. If your chin stops eating, please call us right away!

## **Preventive Care**

Whenever you bring a new chinchilla into your home, a new pet exam should be performed. We also highly recommend that you bring your chinchilla in for a yearly check-up. Chinchillas are good at hiding signs of disease until it is too late, and we may be able to catch a problem early on when it is still treatable.