



Care of Chinchillas

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The chinchilla belongs to a group of rodents called hystricomorphs, and is closely related to the guinea pig and porcupine. They are native to the Andes Mountain areas of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. In the wild state, they live at high altitudes in rocky, barren mountainous regions. They have been bred in captivity since 1923 primarily for their pelts. Some chinchillas fortunate enough to have substandard furs were sold as pets or research animals. Today chinchillas are raised for pets, pelts and research.

Chinchillas are fairly clean, odorless, and friendly pets, but they are usually shy and easily frightened. They do not make very good pets for young children, since they tend to be high strung and hyperactive. The fur is extremely soft and beautiful bluish gray in color, thus leading to their popularity in the pelt industry. Current color mutations include white, silver, beige, and black. Extreme stress can also cause chinchillas to drop their fur, known as a "fur slip". Average captive life span is 10-15 years.

Habitat

Chinchillas must be kept in an area that has good lighting, adequate ventilation, and cool, dry air. They do not tolerate heat or humidity, and they thrive at lower temperatures. The optimal temperature is 60° to 70°F. Wire mesh cages are typically used for chinchillas, with or without a solid floor, though solid floors are recommended for pregnant chinchillas. Spacing between wire mesh should be narrow to prevent legs from being caught and injured. Glass aquariums or plastic containers can be used, but with caution due to their poor ventilation. Wooden cages should not be used since chinchillas are known for gnawing. These animals tend to be very active and acrobatic, thus requiring a lot of space. An ideal enclosure would measure at least 6 ft X 6 ft X 3 ft with a one foot square nest box. Cardboard boxes or PCV tubes should be provided for adequate hiding space. Multi-level enclosures are excellent for allowing chinchillas to climb and jump as they would in the wild. Dust baths should be provided at least once or twice weekly. These must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Finely powdered volcanic ash is marketed as chinchilla dust, which is used to keep the fur clean and well groomed.

Nutrition

The chinchilla's natural diet is primarily hardy grasses which help keep their constantly growing teeth in check. Therefore, in captivity, they should be provided unlimited access to grass hays like Timothy hay, oat hay, or orchard grass. Alfalfa hay is not recommended due to its high calcium content relative to phosphorus. Hay is critical for both nutritional and psychological reasons. Grass hay provides fiber to the diet while serving as an item for the pet to chew rather than its fur. Commercial chinchilla pellets are available but should be limited to ¼ cup daily if they are eating hay well and should not contain any additives like dried fruits or seeds. Some dried fruit, seed, or nuts are acceptable as treats in moderation. However, over-indulgence of fruit and seeds can lead to GI upset, and chinchillas will preferentially eat too much fruit or seed if given the choice with a mixed pellet diet. When the chinchilla variety is not in stock, a standard rabbit or guinea pig pellet can be offered. Chinchillas tend to eat with their hands and often throw out a lot of pellets resulting in wastage. Fresh carrots and leafy greens can also be provided as treats and another source of fiber. Chinchillas can be provided fresh water from sipper-type bottles.

Common Diseases

- Dental Disease: Dental malocclusion is commonly diagnosed in chinchillas. Causes are usually diets low in fiber, trauma, or genetic abnormality. Signs include decreased appetite, decreased stools, drooling, dropping food, wet forepaws, decreased weight, or grossly overgrown teeth. Treatment usually includes dental trim under sedation that often needs to be repeated periodically as chinchillas have open-rooted teeth that grow constantly throughout their life. Sometimes surgical extraction may be recommended, depending on each individual case.
- GI stasis: Slowing of the digestive mobility to complete stasis is a common problem in chinchillas that is usually secondary another disease process, whether this is dental disease, gastroenteritis, dysbiosis (unbalancing of normal gut flora), internal parasites, impaction, trauma, metabolic disease, poor diet, or cancer.
- Heart Disease: Heart problems are fairly common in chinchillas due to a genetic predisposition to them. Although this is a serious condition, it can often be managed with appropriate medication once it is recognized and diagnosed. Initial signs may include decreased activity, breathing difficulty or collapse (known as syncope).

Breeding

Chinchillas generally do not get along well when housed together, with the female being the more aggressive gender. Breeders and pelters commonly set up polygamous colonies with one male having access to five or so females maintained in separate cages. The male has a tunnel along the back of the females cages which enables him to enter any cage at will. The females cannot pass through the tunnel because they are fitted with lightweight collars that are just a little wider than the cage opening.