CHINCHILLA CARE GUIDE

Housing

CAGE

MATERIAL: Chinchillas are extremely heavy chewers so it is best to stick with cages made from metal as they could potentially ingest plastic or other material and run the risk of intestinal blockage. Many cages have plastic bottoms or shelves so if you opt for one of these cages, be sure to check the cage for holes regularly and replace as needed as well as monitor your chin for any signs of blockage (not eating, not drinking, not defecating, lethargy.) Keeping plenty of safe chew toys in the cage can help keep chins from chewing on their habitat itself. Avoid cages with grated floors as they can cause injury.

SIZE: Minimum of approximately 6 cubic feet per chinchilla. Chinchillas are very active pets and love to jump and bounce off the walls of their cages so the bigger the better!

Example
One of the best cage options for chinchillas is the Double Critter Nation. (pictured)

BEDDING

GOOD
- Carefresh*
- Yesterday’s News (paper pellets)
- fleece

BAD
- cedar
- pine
- corn cob
- saw dust
- clay cat litter

BEDDING TIP: If your cage has a shallow bottom pan, use fleece to line it. If your cage has a deep bottom pan, bedding or fleece will work. MN Pocket Pet Rescue recommends avoiding all wood bedding to avoid respiratory illness.

FURNISHINGS

Decking out your chinchillas’ habitat with not only the essentials but also an assortment of fun stuff to do is incredibly important for the happiness and well-being of your chins. It is ideal to change out the toys and furnishings for them in addition to providing a variety and number of items to keep them from getting bored.

Why chew toys? Chinchillas are rodents which means their teeth constantly grow. They require chew toys to gnaw on in order to help keep their teeth trim.

ESSENTIALS
- water bowl or bottle
- food dish
- shelter (box, igloo, etc)
- chew toy (wood, lava)
- levels in cage (shelves, hammocks, etc.)
- dust bath house
- Chin-chiller stone slab

FUN STUFF
- toilet paper tubes
- fiddlesticks
- fleece blankets
- treat balls
- pet beds
- cardboard
- wooden toys
- hay huts
**DIET**

**HAY**: Timothy hay, orchard grass or meadow hay should be available to your chins 24/7. A chinchilla’s digestive system needs hay in order to function properly. Hay also keeps your chinchilla’s teeth trim.

**PELLETS**: Feed 1/8 cup of timothy pellets per day. Pellets are not a substitute for hay! Rabbit or guinea pig pellets are not appropriate for chinchillas.

**TREATS**

Chinchillas have incredibly sensitive digestive systems and treats should be given extremely sparingly - no more than a few very small treats per week (if at all.) Chinchillas will beg for treats and it can be very hard not to give in, but giving too many treats not only can cause digestive upset in the short term but also long term negative health effects.

**GOOD**
- dried rose hips
- alfalfa hay cubes
- dandelion
- rosemary
- hibiscus
- parsley
- carrots
- burnt toast
- shredded wheat
- raisins

**BAD**
- vegetables (except carrots)
- fruit (except raisins)
- nuts
- seeds
- corn
- dairy
- meat

Example
MN Pocket Pet Rescue recommends Oxbow brand pellets.
EXERCISE

FLOOR TIME: Floor time and exercise is very important for a chinchilla. Time outside the cage for a chinchilla should be spent running around, exploring and playing. **It is strongly recommended that there be at least four hours of free range play time in a chinchilla safe environment every day.**

WHEEL: Many chinchillas enjoy running on wheels and they are a great way for your chin to get exercise while in the cage. Use only solid based wheels to avoid injury.

SOCIAL NEEDS

BONDED BUDDIES: Chinchillas are very social and will be happiest when living with other chins. In fact, they live in groups of around 100 in the wild! **It is strongly recommended to keep a minimum of two chinchillas at a time.** Never keep unaltered same sex pairs together.

CHINCHILLA PROOFING: When having outside playtime be sure to secure the area so your chins can’t escape the designated area. Always hide or cover all cords and outlets, put away anything that you do not want chewed on including house plants. Make sure your pets cannot get into small spaces that you cannot reach into such as under the fridge or in couch cushions. If you have other pets, secure them in another room or a crate. It is a good idea to provide your chinchillas with plenty of safe items to chew on during floor time so they are less prone to chew on wallpaper, door frames, etc.

Chinchillas are generally most active at dawn and dusk, so spending time with them during these times may be the most rewarding.

TIME FOR BED: A great way to get your chinchillas to go back into their cage after floor time is to place their dust bath house in the cage so they can see it. Usually, they will hop right in and start rolling around! This way you are not chasing or grabbing your chinchillas which is very scary for them.

LEARNING HOW TO TAME YOUR CHINCHILLA

http://www.chinchillachronicles.com/taming_a_chinchilla.html

KEY COMPONENTS OF TRAINING

- trust
- positive reinforcement
- consistency
- repetition
- patience

TEACHING YOUR CHINCHILLA TO TRUST YOU

Since chinchillas should only have a few treats a week, be sure to break up a treat into very tiny pieces for training.

Chinchillas can learn their names! Reward your chin with a bit of treat every time he comes to his name.

A great way to bond with your chins is letting them out of their cage to run around. Be sure to watch your chins for cues. If they come to you, pet them, but leave them alone if they don’t want to be touched. Chinchillas in the wild are prey animals which means they are hunted and eaten by other animals, so when you go to pet them, get down at their level and **DO NOT** chase them. The more you let them out to play, the sooner they will be comfortable with you.

Speak softly to your chinchilla so it will get used to your voice.

Coax your chin in and out of the cage rather than picking him up or pulling him out of the cage forcefully.
CHINCHILLA CARE GUIDE
Health

GENERAL INFO

ANNUAL EXAM: It is important to take your chinchilla to the vet for an annual exam, to ensure your chin is in good health. Chinchillas do not require vaccines.

LIFESPAN: 15 - 20 years

REPRODUCTION: Chinchillas become sexually mature and are able to reproduce at 4 months of age. Baby chinchillas are generally weaned at 8 weeks of age.

GENERAL SIGNS OF ILLNESS

- any behavioral change
- lethargy
- defensive aggression
- disinterested in treats
- changes in eating or drinking
- pawing at mouth
- poor coat quality
- head tilt
- teeth grinding
- watery eyes
- red/warm ears

If your chinchilla displays any change in behavior or signs of illness, take it to a vet immediately.

COMMON ISSUES

DENTAL PROBLEMS

Due to the structure of chinchillas' teeth, they can be prone to dental problems such as malocclusion. If your chin is drooling/has saliva build up on the face, has bad breath, decreased appetite, weight loss or lumps on the face, get him to the vet immediately. Chins can starve to death if their teeth are not working properly or are painful. Dental problems often require x-rays and tooth filing or abscess removal under anesthesia. Chinchillas keep their back teeth trim by eating hay so be sure your chin is grazing throughout the day.

GRASS HAY - THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL THROUGHOUT THE DAY!
Chinchillas must have access to hay 24/7. Hay keeps your chin's body running!

DIARRHEA

Chinchillas have extremely sensitive digestive systems which can upset easily. They can get diarrhea from stress, change in diet, too many treats, bacterial or parasitic infections. If your chin gets diarrhea, make sure he is drinking lots of water to prevent dehydration. Symptoms include straining to defecate, staining around the anus, hunched posture and lethargy.

RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS

Chinchillas can easily develop respiratory infections which can quickly turn into pneumonia. If you notice that your chin is sneezing, has eye or nose discharge, has a lack of appetite or is lethargic, get him to a vet as soon as possible. Chins, like most pocket pets, are prey animals and thus tend to hide any weakness or illness for as long as possible. This means that by the time you notice symptoms, your pet is usually very sick. To help avoid respiratory illness, keep your chin's cage away from drafts, clean the cage often, use fleece for bedding, keep stress to a minimum and provide your pet with as large of habitat as possible.

HEAT STROKE

Chinchillas are native to the Andes Mountains and are require lower temperatures and humidity. They must be kept between 60° - 70° F with a humidity level of 40% - 60%. Never let the temperature where your chinchillas are reach above 80° F. Signs of heat stroke include high body temperature, panting, gasping, open mouth breathing, lethargy, coma and death.
SAFE HANDLING

PICKING UP YOUR CHINCHILLA: Most chinchillas do not enjoy being picked up as they feel more safe and secure on the ground, so try to only pick up your chin when necessary. Always use two hands when picking up your chin. One hand should support the rump while the other supports the chest. Hold him close to your body. It sometimes helps to talk to him softly to comfort your chinchilla. Never pick your chin up by the ears, legs or tail - this is very painful and harmful to your pet! If you grab your chin by the tail, the skin and hair will slip off in your hand while the chinchilla escapes. This is a defense mechanism to escape predators in the wild. If this happens to your pet, take it to the vet immediately.

TRUST: It is ideal to let your chinchillas come to you before reaching in to pick them up as this develops trust. Talk to your chin and let it sniff your hand before you pick it up to announce that you are coming.

GROOMING

DENTAL CARE: You do not need to brush your chinchilla’s teeth but you must provide plenty of hay and chew toys so your chin can wear down its teeth naturally. Check your chin’s teeth regularly to be sure they are not overgrown or misaligned. If they are, take him to the vet as they will need to be trimmed by a professional.

BATHING: Chinchillas bathe by rolling in dust. Provide your chins’ bath house with 1-2 inches of clean dust 2 - 4 times a week. If you notice their fur looks greasy, increase the frequency. Leave the bath house in the cage for 20 minutes then remove (or they will poop and pee in it.) Change the dust when it gets coarse or dirty. You will enjoy watching your chins flip and roll around happily in their bath! Never bathe a chinchilla in water, this is very dangerous. If your chinchilla needs to be cleaned off, simply wipe debris away with a damp cloth.

NAIL TRIMS: You should not have to trim your chinchilla’s nails as they take care of this themselves. If you notice your chin has excessively long nails, take him to the vet as this may be an indication that he is not feeling well.

BRUSHING: You do not need to brush your chinchilla. If he looks disheveled, he probably needs a dust bath.

THROUGH THE BARS: Never feed your chinchilla or stick your fingers through the cage bars. Doing so encourages pets to bite at fingers both in and out of the cage. Always offer treats with an open palm when possible.
Chinchillas have a fairly complex communication system. This is a guide to the most common sounds and behaviors. Learn more here: chinchillachronicles.com/chinchilla_sounds_and_postures.html. We also recommend looking up chinchilla sounds and listening to them online to get a better understanding of your chins and their communication systems.

VOCALIZATION

BARKING: This sounds just as you would imagine. When a chinchilla barks it generally means the chin is sounding the alarm.

ALARM CALL: A piercing, high pitched squeal or squeak means fear or pain.

CONTACT CALL: Sounds like grunts or hoots. This means your chin is feeling playful, curious and relaxed.

EXPLORATORY CALL: Soft chirps. This is a sign of contentment as well as a way to let others know of its presence.

Every chinchilla has a unique voice and way of speaking. The more you spend time with your chinchillas the better you will understand them. You will even be able to tell your chinchillas apart by their voice!

BODY LANGUAGE

BINKYING: Chinchillas hop, bounce, leap and run around when they are happy and having fun. They especially love bouncing off of walls! This is also called popcorning.

FLOPPING: When your chinchilla flops down on its side, it means it is happy and relaxed. If they flop around you it means he is comfortable with you being around him.

FREEZING: When a chinchilla stops and stands very straight and still this means he heard or smelled something unfamiliar. Sometimes they will also let out an alarm call.

URINE SPRAYING: If a chinchilla is afraid, especially females, it may spray urine in order to escape.

FUR SLIP: Another defense mechanism. If you grab your chinchilla it may shed a chunk of fur and run off (similar to the tail slip.) This is not a medical concern and the fur will grow back.

BITING: Chinchillas generally do not like to be handled. They will bite as a warning and a defense mechanism. It is ideal to never pick up your chin unless they come to you. Chinchillas to not respond well to discipline or physical correction. It is best to redirect their attention to promote good behavior.

CHEWING: Chinchillas are high energy animals and they love to explore and chew! If you notice your chins are chewing excessively (walls, doors, etc.) it could be that their back teeth are getting long and uncomfortable. This is often because the chin is not eating enough hay. To avoid this, be sure you are meal feeding your chins pellets and providing access to hay 24/7. You may want to try different types of hay such as meadow hay or compressed hay to entice your chins. Additionally, when your chins are out be sure to provide lots of acceptable chewing surfaces.

It is extremely rare for a chinchilla to be comfortable with new owners and surroundings right away. Be sure to take things very slowly and give you chin plenty time to adapt. Check out our Trust Training Program and Bonding pages for tips.