



# Milwood Animal Clinic

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## Chinchillas

*There are quite a few sources of information on pet care available over the internet, some of which offer correct information. Others sources can be incorrect and harmful to your pet. Please consult with your veterinarian before making lifestyle, feeding, handling or caging changes.*

*Small caged pets can be wonderful companions and learning experiences for children. However, young children should not be assigned full time caretaker duties. A missed meal or a lack of water to drink can be life-threatening for small animals that must have a constant supply of food and hydration available to survive. Plan on supervising your children's care of their pet every day.*



### Natural History

It is very helpful in the understanding of exotic pet behavior, feeding and care to know of the environments that the animals inhabit in the wild.

Chinchillas are native to the high altitudes of the Andes Mountains in South America, where the atmosphere is dry and cool. These nocturnal rodents live in burrows and crevices and feed on plant leaves, fruits, seeds and small insects. They have the ability to jump distances of 6 feet and are a quite active little animals. Since they are preyed upon by many other species including birds of prey, snakes, and small mammals, their ability to escape quickly into hiding places is very important to their survival. Chinchillas in the wild live in social groups and breed at any time of the year, having small, fully furred offspring of one to two per litter. Their normal lifespan in the wild is 10 to 20 years.

The chinchillas that we find as pets are descendants of wild caught animals that were bred in captivity for their extremely soft, dense and warm fur. Due to over-hunting for pelts, the animals now exist in the wild only in limited colonies in Peru and Chile.

### Chinchillas as Pets

Chinchillas tend to be fairly clean, odorless, friendly, and social pets but are also shy and easily frightened. Chinchillas can be handled and enjoy gentle petting. They do not make very good pets for young children, since they tend to be high-strung and highly active (both the child and the pet) and chinchillas are very delicate, becoming startled and jumping very quickly. Chinchillas are very active and require large caging. Being nocturnal creatures, they may sleep most of the day and be very busy and active at night. These animals do not have the ability to sweat and cannot tolerate temperatures over 80 degrees or very high humidity. Their fur is extremely dense and soft. The natural color is beautiful bluish grey. Current color mutations

include white, silver, beige, and black. They do not wet bathe; their fur is so thick that it cannot dry out and is subject to fungal growth if gets wet. Chinchillas do, however, enjoy dust baths.

### **Housing**

Chinchilla caging should be large enough for them to run, jump and explore, with a hiding box or tunnel. Recall that they are prey animals and easily frightened, so a place to hide out of view is very important in reducing stress. Avoid open wire bottom cages as they can cause pressure sores on the feet and pose an entanglement risk. Since chinchillas enjoy jumping, a tall cage with one or more levels is great for them. Wire siding and top should be of sufficiently narrow spacing that your pet cannot fit its head between the bars. Watch for and remove sharp objects and wires. Avoid making caging out of wood as Chinchillas are great chewers and many woods are toxic or treated with toxic chemicals. Your pet will eventually chew through even safe woods.



The environment in the vicinity of the pet's cage is another important consideration. Because of their sensitive nature, chinchillas are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement, and other such stresses. Since they are active at night, they require quiet periods of light in order to rest. Also be sure to select a location away from direct sunlight and avoid cold damp areas. Chinchillas thrive in a dry, cool environment with adequate ventilation. Drastic environmental changes should be prevented (especially high temperatures and humidity). Chinchillas cannot tolerate temperatures over 80 degrees or high humidity and can suffer from heat stroke. Keep this in mind during the hot weather months.

### **Bedding**

Your chinchilla needs litter or bedding material provided in its enclosure that is non toxic and does not pose a danger of inhalation or ingestion. Avoid aromatic cedar and pine shavings as they cause irritation to the skin and potential respiratory and liver problems. A paper based bedding is recommended. Care Fresh and Yesterday's News are brands easily found at pet stores. Replace soiled litter once to twice a week or more often if needed.



### **Dust Baths**

As mentioned previously, a chinchilla's fur is so dense that it will not dry out properly if it becomes wet. Your little pet will greatly enjoy dust baths however. In the wild they roll in volcanic ash which helps keep their fur coat healthy. For your pet, provide an inch of dust in a shallow rounded bowl for about 10 minutes several times a week. He will greatly enjoy it! Remove the dust bath after each use. Chinchilla dust can be purchased at pet stores.

### **Handling**

Since chinchillas are very active and jumpy, care must be taken in handling to avoid injury to them. They can leap very quickly and be severely injured in a fall. They can lose large patches of fur if handled roughly or held by the scruff. It is very important that your pet feel comfortable and secure. To best hold a chinchilla safely, hold the base of the tail and hind legs with one hand while the other hand supports the chest and shoulders.

### **Play**

Chinchillas are active, fun little animals that can have a great time outside their enclosure as long as safety precautions are taken. These little guys explore their environment through chewing and tasting so all outside play should be strictly controlled. Before letting your pet explore outside his cage remove all houseplants, electrical cords and anything you do not want chewed on. Other pets such as cats and dogs will consider a chinchilla a prey animal and should never be in the same room when yours is loose. Be aware that underneath the furniture is a very attractive space for them and they may not easily be gotten back out from under it! Remember that chinchillas are delicate animals and it is not safe for small children to be handling them.

### **Nutrition**

Grass hay is an absolute necessity in the diet of your pet chinchilla. Chewing hay more closely replicates their natural diet and foraging behaviors, preventing digestive and dental disease, as well as obesity, and it keeps them busy! It should make up the majority of your chinchilla's diet. Any mix of grass hay is fine. Examples are Western Timothy, Orchard Grass, and Oat Hay. Alfalfa should not be fed; it is not actually a true hay and can predispose them to a number of medical problems.



Pellets can be fed in limited amounts; they should not be the main diet. One to two tablespoons per day should be the maximum amount. The pellets should also be made from a grass hay (usually timothy). If you cannot find a timothy-based chinchilla pellet, rabbit pellets made from timothy hay are fine for chinchillas. The most common pelleted diets found will be made from alfalfa, so the ingredients must be looked at closely. Read your labels! *Choose a pelleted diet that does not contain alfalfa, or nuts, seeds and dried fruits, as these are too high in fat.*

Vegetables and fruit should be considered treats and fed only on a limited basis. Use a variety of dark leafy greens. Red leaf lettuce and romaine are examples of good supplementary treats to be given in very small amounts. Do not feed gas producing vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower. All fresh items must be thoroughly washed to avoid exposing your pet to pesticide residues or bacterial contamination.

### **Health**

The most important ways to keep your chinchilla healthy is to follow the guidelines provided by your veterinarian regarding proper caging, handling and feeding of your pet. These things, combined with close daily observation, attention to detail and regular check ups with your veterinarian will help ensure that your pet enjoys a long healthy life.

Observe your pet daily for changes in behavior, activity level, eating habits, and bowel habits. Having a pet that is comfortable with handling a great benefit so that it can be examined up close on a daily basis. Inspect fur, feet and toes, eyes, nose and mouth, ears and hind end cleanliness as you handle your pet.

If your chinchilla has a change in eating habits, especially lack of appetite, it could be signaling serious problems developing. Changes in stools, such as loosely formed bowel movements or a decrease in stool formation are also of concern.

*Report abnormalities or changes to your veterinarian right away. Chinchillas can become very ill very rapidly. Decreased energy, a loss of appetite and changes in bowel movements in such a small animal is a serious concern. Injuries have the potential to be life-threatening.*

Provide your chinchilla with a constant supply of fresh water. A rodent watering bottle usually works well as it prevents the water from becoming contaminated with caging materials.

## **Nutritious Dark Leafy Greens**

These vegetables are excellent food sources for many small animals including herbivorous and omnivorous reptiles, birds, rabbits, guinea pigs, and other herbivorous mammals.

### **Feed the following greens in abundance:**

Arugula  
Basil  
Cilantro  
Clover (no pesticides or herbicides)  
Dill leaves  
Endive\*  
Escarole  
Mint  
Peppermint leaves  
Radicchio  
Raspberry leaves  
Red or Green Leaf Lettuce  
Romaine lettuce (no iceberg or light colored leaf lettuce)\*  
Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides or herbicides)\*  
Watercress\*  
Wheat grass

### **The following greens should be fed less often and in smaller amounts:**

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts^  
Beet greens (tops)^\*  
Bok Choy†  
Brussels sprouts^†  
Carrot tops^\*  
Collard greens†^\*  
Kale†\*  
Mustard greens†^\*  
Parsley^\*  
Radish tops^  
Swiss Chard^  
Spinach †^\*  
Turnip Greens†^

\* Contains high amounts of Vitamin A, which is good for skin health

^ Contains high amounts of oxalates & may cause health problems if fed often. Use sparingly.

† Contains high amounts of goitrogens & may cause health problems if fed often. Use sparingly.

## Chinchilla Care - Review

- Rodents native to the cold, dry high altitudes of the Andes Mountains
- Nocturnal (active at night)
- Friendly and gentle, but also shy and easily frightened
  
- Cannot tolerate excessive heat and/or humidity
- Need a large, solid bottomed enclosure with a hide box
- Use paper based bedding
- Enjoy dust baths
  
- Should be handled gently, by older children or adults
- Love to chew so must be closely watched when out of cage
- Are prey animals so keep dogs and cats away!
  
- Need grass hay (not alfalfa) as their main diet
- May have small amounts of non-alfalfa pellets
- May be given vegetables and fruit as treats only
- Need clean, fresh water at all times
  
- Observe daily for changes in eating habits, stools, and activity
- Seek veterinary care right away if abnormalities are noticed
- Plan regular examinations with your veterinarian
- Enjoy your furry little buddy!

