



Mark E. Burgess DVM  
2425 SW Cedar Hills Blvd.  
Beaverton, OR 97005  
(503) 643-2137

## CARING FOR YOUR CHINCHILLA

Chinchillas are large rodents which inhabit the Andes Mountains at high altitudes. They have been in captivity since 1923. They are clean, odorless, generally friendly pets but are often shy and easily frightened. They are probably not ideal pets for young children. Chinchilla fur is very soft, and various colors are available including silver, beige, black, and white. Their large ears and bushy tails contribute to their attractive appearance.

### CHINCHILLA FACTS:

**Lifespan:** 5-10 years (up to 18 years).    **Pregnancy:** 111 days average.  
**Body temperature:** 97-100° F.    **Litter size:** 1-5.  
**Estrous cycle:** 30-50 days.    **Weaning age:** 6-8 weeks

**DIET:** The diet should consist of lean grass hay such as timothy or oat hay (not alfalfa), and chinchilla pellets. If necessary a guinea pig pellet may be substituted. Avoid pellet mixes with seeds, nuts or dried fruits as they may cause obesity or bowel upsets. The pellets may be rationed if obesity occurs, but the hay is always fed free choice. Fresh vegetables (mostly leafy greens) may be used *sparingly* (up to 10-15% of the total diet). Avoid sweet items (fruits, corn, baby carrots, tomatoes, etc.) and high protein items (oats, beans, alfalfa, soy, nuts) as these may cause bowel upsets. Minimize vegies in the cabbage family (kale, cabbage, bok choy, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, collards), as they may upset the bowel also. Fresh water should always be provided; a water bottle is cleaner than a bowl and can't be spilled. Keep the food and water supplies very clean.

**HANDLING:** Chinchillas usually don't bite, but may jump out of your hands. They also are prone to "fur slip" wherein patches of hair come loose with rough handling. Always hold your pet firmly, with one hand around the front of the body and the other hand supporting the rear legs. A towel may help with restraint if your pet is very jumpy or tries to bite. Chinchilla bones are fragile and fracture easily; handle gently.

**HOUSING:** Chinchillas should be housed in a well ventilated cage that is kept cool and dry. They don't tolerated heat & humidity; their ideal temperature range is 60-72° F. Wire cages are usually used; glass or plastic cages must be well ventilated to minimize humidity and odor buildup. Wood cages are hard to keep clean and may be gnawed through. The cage floor can be wire or solid. Wire floors allow waste to fall through but may cause foot sores; cover the wire with thick straw or provide a solid platform (wood or cardboard) in one area to sit on. Solid floors should be covered with straw, fleece, or paper bedding to absorb wastes; clean the cage often. Chinchillas are very active and require space; a good cage size is 6 ft X 6 ft X 3 ft with a one foot square nest box. If a smaller cage is used then ample exercise time outside the cage should be provided. Be careful to prevent chewing on wood furniture, baseboards, extension cords, etc. Chinchillas are not very social and are usually housed separately unless breeding.

**Dust baths** should be provided at least once to twice weekly to maintain healthy fur. The bath must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Finely powdered volcanic ash is used; several brands of "chinchilla dust" are sold. An alternative is a mix of 9 parts silver sand to 1 part Fuller's earth. The dust should be provided for only a short time during the day.

**BREEDING:** Chinchillas tend to fight when housed together; females are more aggressive. Breeders often use polygamous colonies with one male having access to several females housed separately. Chinchillas breed all year, especially November through May. Females may attack the male so he should be able to leave the breeding cage; the female may wear a collar which prevents her exiting the cage. Up to 20% of females may not breed, likely due to incompatibility with the male. Pregnancy lasts 105-115 days (ave. 111 days). Most births are in the morning; litter size is 1-5 babies (average 2).

## **COMMON DISEASES:**

**FUR SLIP:** Chinchillas often lose patches of fur when handled roughly. Fighting between animals also may cause hair loss. The skin is not injured by fur slip but the coat may be unsightly.

**BARBERING/ FUR CHEWING:** This is a behavioral problem wherein the chinchilla chews its fur or another animal's fur causing a rough moth-eaten appearance. Contributing factors may include boredom, dirty fur, diet imbalances, or hereditary factors such as a stress prone personality. Providing cardboard chew toys such as paper towel roll centers, minimizing stress and disturbances, and keeping the cage clean, cool & dry may help prevent barbering. Selecting & breeding animals with low key personalities may also reduce incidence of this problem.

**HEAT STROKE:** High temperatures and humidity aren't tolerated by chinchillas. Overheated pets often lie on their sides and pant. They may feel hot to the touch. Excess humidity may produce unkempt, damp fur. Treatment starts with misting or bathing in cold water; veterinary aid should be quickly sought as this condition is often fatal.

**ENTERITIS (INTESTINAL INFECTION):** A common disease in chinchillas. Often the exact cause is uncertain. Bacterial, viral and protozoal agents have all been associated with forms of intestinal upset in chinchillas. A few causes include Pseudomonas, Salmonella, E. coli, and Giardia. Poor husbandry and improper diet may increase risk of an outbreak. Simple gut upsets without infection also may occur if the diet is not correct; these are dangerous also. Symptoms may include diarrhea, depression, appetite loss, abdominal pain or bloating, partial paralysis, and death. A fecal exam may aid diagnosis. This condition is life-threatening; veterinary care should be quickly sought. Treatment includes supportive care and sometimes antibiotic therapy. Bacterial supplements such as milk free acidophilus may help; antidiarrheals such as kapectate or blackberry leaves can be used. Bowel stimulants (Reglan, Propulsid) may be used if the bowel has stopped moving. Severe cases may receive injected fluids. Bowel upsets can be fatal if not caught early.

**DENTAL DISEASE:** Chinchilla teeth grow constantly. They are prone to several tooth problems. **Malocclusion** is a condition wherein the teeth don't properly wear against each other and overgrow. Incisor (front tooth) overgrowth is visible; the teeth may achieve extreme lengths and protrude from the mouth like tusks. Molars (back teeth) may overgrow but aren't visible; signs include drooling, oral odor, difficulty eating, and a wet or soiled chin. The causes of these problems are variable and may include infection, tooth trauma from cage bar biting, diet, and hereditary factors. Treatment includes grinding or trimming the teeth to proper length, and correction of any known underlying factors. Extraction of some abnormal teeth may be needed. **Tooth infections** may involve front or back teeth, and can result in facial swelling, odor, appetite loss, and loose or painful teeth. Treatment is via extraction of infected teeth, draining all visible abscesses, and oral antibiotics. Severe abscesses may involve large areas of the face and may be life threatening.

**RESPIRATORY INFECTION:** Respiratory infection can involve the nasal passages, producing sneezing or runny eyes & nose; severe cases can involve the lungs (pneumonia) and produce wheezing, lethargy, rough coat and labored breathing. Untreated this can be fatal. The infections are bacterial, and may be caused by Bordetella, Pasteurella, Pseudomonas, and E. Coli. Damp, dirty or drafty housing may increase risk of infection. Treat with antibiotics, supportive care, and correction of any problems with the diet & environment.

**RINGWORM (FUNGAL INFECTION):** Trichophyton is a common fungus found in soil and on animals which can cause skin disease in chinchillas. It is most common in babies recently brought home from the pet store. Infected pets may occasionally transmit the fungus to other animals or humans. Signs are usually crusty or flaky skin around the face and ears, and sometimes on the feet. Hair loss and scabs may occur. Treatment involves topical or systemic antifungal drugs.

**FRACTURES:** Chinchillas have long slender legs with relatively fragile bone structure, and are prone to jumping and falling, or getting legs caught in cage bars. Fractures easily occur. Most need splinting or pinning to stabilize the fracture. Badly traumatized or infected legs occasionally need amputation, although chinchillas do quite well on three legs. Get any wound or fracture treated immediately to avoid severe complications.