



Glenway Animal Hospital
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Frequently Asked Chinchilla Questions

Congratulations on the arrival of your new Chinchilla! The doctors and staff of Glenway Animal Hospital are committed to making sure that your newest family member lives a long, happy, and healthy life. Many disease and behavior issues with small mammals can be avoided with proper diet, housing and husbandry, as well as knowing what is normal, what is not, and when to seek medical attention. We've put together this list of some frequently asked questions and their corresponding answers. This list is not all-inclusive so if you have additional questions please don't hesitate to contact us!

How should I handle my chinchilla?

A chinchilla's natural curiosity and friendly disposition make them fairly easy to handle. When lifting a chinchilla place one hand under the abdomen and one on the top of the chinchilla's body. If you grasp a chinchilla that is startled it can lose a patch of fur known as fur slip. DO NOT grasp a chinchilla by the tail either.

What should I feed my Chinchilla?

Good quality food and fresh, clean water must be readily available at all times. Chinchillas are herbivores, and need to have food moving through their intestinal tract all the time. Fiber is key to keeping the gut moving properly, so the the most important component of a good adult chinchilla diet is constant access to fresh grass (not alfafa, which is a legume) hays. It is recommended that you keep at least 2 of the following types of hay on hand and feed a variety (choose from Timothy, Orchard Grass, Brome, Oat. Hay is also essential to maintaining good dental health – chewing hay keeps chinchillas' constantly growing, open-rooted teeth worn down and in good wear. A variety of hays supply different nutrients for more balanced nutrition and to keep your chinchilla from becoming a picky eater. Hay quality varies according to season, brand, and location grown. It is important that hay is stored properly so it doesn't become moldy or lose nutrients.

Pellets should be fed in small quantities to be sure they are getting all of the vitamins and minerals they need to for balanced nutrition. Pellets should be high-fiber grass hay based pellet specifically formulated for chinchillas. Be sure to feed pellets that are age and breeding status- specific ; young and breeding animals need higher levels of calcium and protein, and the pellets are formulated accordingly. Avoid pellet mixtures that contain colored "poofies," seeds, corn and nuts – chinchillas cannot digest these things easily,

and they cause gastrointestinal distress or obstructions. Limit pellets to 1-2 tablespoons per day. Our favorite brand of pellets is Oxbow's Chinchilla Food.

While treats are fun to give and get, it is important that they not make up more than 10% of the total diet. Commercially available treats (like yogurt drops) are typically high in sugar and carbohydrates and should be avoided. Tiny pieces of dried and fresh fruit and vegetables such as carrots, and green vegetables can be given if in small quantities. Because chinchillas are unable to vomit, there is concern with giving dried fruits such as raisins, as they can cause choking or bloat.

All food should be offered in a heavy ceramic crock that won't tip over. The sides of the bowl need to be high enough so bedding or feces won't get into the bowl and low enough so the chinchilla can easily access the food. Water can be offered in a sturdy crock and/or sipper bottle. Care must be taken to sanitize water bottles and crocks frequently so that bacterial contamination (a leading cause of enteritis) does not occur.

Where should I house my Chinchilla?

Despite their small size, chinchillas require a fairly large space. A large cage with multiple levels so your chinchillas can run and climb, jump and play is necessary. There needs to be a space for a dust bath and a space where they can hide / sleep out of view; a cardboard box or plumber's PVC pipes works well for this. Cages need to be kept out of direct sunlight and drafts, and in an area where the temperature remains steady and controlled between 50 – 68 F. Chinchillas do not tolerate dampness and are prone to heat stroke at temperatures above 82 F. Chinchillas are crepuscular, meaning they are most active in the morning and evening, and they require a quiet period with low light in order to rest. Ideally, they are close to family living quarters rather than being off in a corner of an unused room. Cages need to have a solid floor, with newspaper and a paper-based litter that is soft and absorbent (Carefresh, Oxbow's EcoStraw, Yesterday's News). Aromatic wood chips (cedar or untreated pine) are not acceptable because they can cause respiratory distress. Corncob bedding is often ingested and should also be avoided. Wire-floored cages are unacceptable, as they cause stress on the feet and limbs – we've seen broken nails and limbs, terrible "bumblefoot" osteomyelitis (bone infection) and other lesions caused by uneven pressure on the foot pads secondary to standing on wire bottoms. If your cage does have a wire bottom, it should be lined with cardboard and have paper and litter on top. Wire sides of the cages are fine, as chinchillas love to climb and play.

Chinchillas have very active sebaceous (oil) glands on their skin and need to have access to a dust bath several times a week, if not daily, to keep their fur clean and healthy. The bathing area must be large and deep enough for the chinchilla to roll over in it. Commercially available chinchilla dust can be purchased at pet stores and is powdered volcanic ash. Our favorite brand is Oxbow's lava dust. DO NOT use beach or playground sand, it is not suitable for dust baths.

Chinchillas enjoy time outside the cage to run around, explore, and spend time with you. If you do this, care must be taken beforehand to "chinchilla-proof" the room or space. Cats and dogs should be confined to another space, electric cords must be removed or covered, and toilet lids and dryer doors must be closed. Get down on the floor and inspect the space from your chinchilla's perspective to avoid situations where he or she could be at risk of injury, escape or becoming trapped.

Does my chinchilla need a friend?

Because they are friendly creatures, chinchillas bond very readily to humans and they usually enjoy the company of other chinchillas. Slow and supervised introductions are needed before putting 2 chinchillas together – it is best to consult with an experienced chinchilla owner before undertaking a bonding adventure. Obviously, if you don't want babies, do not put un-neutered males and females together. If you have a breeding pair, females tend to be very aggressive to males during pregnancy and raising young, so he needs to be removed at this time. You must carefully analyze whether you have the room and financial means to properly care for more than one pet before acquiring multiple chinchillas. There are usually an abundance of chinchillas listed on pet welfare/adoption websites such as www.petfinder.com.

When should my chinchilla see a veterinarian?

Your chinchilla should have a full physical examination by a veterinarian familiar with this species at least every six months to detect subtle problems such as malocclusion and/or overgrowth of the teeth, skin, eye, and ear abnormalities, or change in weight. Schedule an initial examination soon after getting your chinchilla. A fecal specimen to detect the presence of intestinal parasites should be checked initially, and periodically, especially if there are any gastrointestinal issues. Take your chinchilla to your veterinarian if you notice any changes in behavior, bathroom habits, poor appetite, abnormal swelling, abnormal discharge, ruffed fur, inactivity or limping. As prey animals, they will often hide disease states until they are quite ill, so it is important to know what is normal for your chinchillas so you can detect abnormalities and treat them quickly.

What should I do in case of emergency?

Glenway Animal Hospital is open 7 am to 6 pm every weekday and from 8 am to 12 noon on select Saturdays. We currently have 3 veterinarians on staff that see small mammal patients, so most of the time that we are open we can see chinchillas. For after hour care see our emergency options handout. Emergency situations include refusal to eat or drink (this can become very serious quickly), bleeding, difficulty breathing, sudden or abnormal swelling (anywhere), abdominal distension, any sign of acute pain or distress (vocalization, hunching, straining to urinate or defecate, etc).

Common diseases in chinchillas

Malocclusion – often referred to as “slobbers”. Dental disease accounts for at least ¼ of the problems seen by veterinarians.

Enteritis - caused by bacteria, this can be fatal if left untreated.

Diarrhea – Loose or watery stool . This can indicate intestinal parasitism, a dietary sensitivity or bacterial infection.

Gastrointestinal Stasis - aka ileus or lack of intestinal movement. This can be quickly fatal, so seek immediate treatment

Fur Ring - When chinchillas shed, groomed fur can slip around the penis of a male chinchilla causing a functional occlusion of the urinary tract.

Ringworm – a contagious fungal infection of the skin.

How long can I expect my chinchilla to live?

The average lifespan of a chinchilla is 12-20 years. There is a lot of individual as well as breed variation, but a good quality diet and preventative medicine and care can help your guinea pig live its life to the fullest potential.

For more information:

www.oxbowhay.com Premium hay, pellets, treats & supplements, information

www.veterinarypartner.com a website run by veterinarians

www.ohiopetchinchilla.com

www.oocitie.org/forchintechins

www.cachins.org

Fun chinchilla facts

Chinchillas are native to the Andes Mountains. They feed on vegetation in the early morning and late evening.

Chinchillas weigh around 1.1 to 1.8 pounds. Chinchillas are typically 9 to 15 inches long.

It is normal for chinchillas to be observed eating their own stool . This helps with nutrient recycling.

Chinchillas use their tail to help them balance when jumping.

In the wild Chinchillas live in colonies of 100 or more.

Female estrus cycles are between 30-50 days. Chinchillas will breed throughout the year, with November and May being the main breeding times. The gestation period is between 105-115 days. Birth usually takes place in the early morning hours, usually with no signs that it is impending. 2 babies are the most common but litter size can be from 1-5. Chinchilla young are precocious, meaning they are born fully furred with teeth and opens eyes at birth.