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Caring for your Chinchilla

Before choosing a chinchilla as a pet, you need to consider that they can live up to 15 years in captivity. They are lively animals and mostly nocturnal, so they are not ideal as children's pets, and certainly children need to be supervised in the care and handling of them.

Home comforts

Chinchillas are usually kept as indoor pets and this is most suitable in our climate. They can survive quite cold temperatures, but draughts can be very dangerous for them, so they must be in a draught-free environment. They are prone to heatstroke in warm conditions, so never place their cage in the sunshine. Being nocturnal, they are not suitable to keep in bedrooms as they may keep you up all night. Chinchillas are large, active animals, so they need plenty of space. The minimum cage size for a pair is approximately 1m x 1.5m floor space, by 1.3m tall with shelves at different heights. Your chinchillas should be allowed out for supervised exercise as much as possible (but at least once a day). Shredded paper is better than shavings or sawdust in the bottom of the cage as the latter will tend to get caught in the chinchilla's dense fur.

Chinchillas need an enclosed box to sleep in during the day. This needs to be large enough for the number of animals in the cage to curl up together if they wish, but there should be enough boxes for the number of chinchillas in the cage in case they prefer to have their own space. Wooden boxes are ideal, but whatever you use will eventually be chewed and need to be replaced! Any good quality small pet bedding is ideal for chinchillas and they will enjoy adding to this themselves by being given empty cardboard tubes to chew.

Chinchillas are not happy alone, so you should get two at the same time if possible. Litter-mates will live happily together but, if not the same sex, the male must be neutered to prevent breeding.

Introducing chinchillas

To introduce a new chinchilla to your existing one, it is important to introduce them slowly to avoid fights. Put them in separate cages side by side, about 10cm apart. This will enable them to see and smell each other without physical contact. Put their beds at opposite ends of the cages so they each feel that they have somewhere to escape to. Give each chinchilla its own dust bath, but swap these over daily, so that they get used to each other's scent. Over a period of a week or so, move the cages and beds closer until the chinchillas are sleeping next to each other. When the two seem to be living happily side by side, place the existing chinchilla into the new chinchilla's cage. They may take to each other straight away, or there may be some initial squabbling and disturbance. If this seems serious, separate them again for a few more days, but things should

eventually settle down. In general it is easier to introduce animals of the opposite sex (in which case the male must be neutered first) or to introduce a young chinchilla to an adult.

Food for thought

Chinchillas are herbivores and, in their native South America, they eat grasses, other low-growing green plants and chew the bark off trees. Chinchillas need a diet high in fibre and protein but low in moisture and fat. High fat foods will cause liver disease and greens which are too lush will give them colic or cause bloating. A diet lacking in fibre will cause poor gut movement, will allow the teeth to become overgrown, and may also result in fur chewing. They also need a high vitamin C content in their diet and so must not be fed rabbit mix. Chinchilla foods are available to buy in pet shops. The pellet type is best as, with mixes, your chinchilla may pick out favourite bits, resulting in an unbalanced diet. These pellets are not sufficient on their own though; your chinchilla also needs a constant supply of good quality hay. To Place the hay in a small rack, and refill it each day. The pellets you feed your chinchilla should be rationed to about one tablespoon per day for a healthy adult and, as with all animals, chinchillas need a constant supply of fresh drinking water.

Treats

Raisins and sultanas are ideal treats for your chinchilla and can be used as a reward in training too. Avoid feeding too many, so that the chinchilla continues to see them as a treat. Some chinchillas will also enjoy a little slice of fresh vegetable such as carrot, but take care not to supply too much as it may cause diarrhoea. Peanuts and sunflower seeds should be avoided, as they are too high in fat.

Health matters

Dental care: As with all rodents, chinchilla teeth grow continuously, so they need plenty of hard material to eat and chew on. Chewing toys such as a piece of apple wood or rodent toys from pet shops will help prevent dental problems. Sadly, even the best-kept chinchilla may develop dental problems and these can become serious if left untreated. Signs of dental problems include reluctance to eat, drooling and wetness under the chin, and runny eyes. If your chinchilla shows any of these signs let us know.

Fur chewing: May be a sign of stress, boredom or poor diet. Chinchillas are social animals and need the companionship of another chinchilla. If you do have just one chinchilla you need to spend lots of time keeping your chinchilla entertained – grooming, playing and handling. However, you are advised to consider getting a second chinchilla for company. Chinchillas that are not given hay may start to chew their own fur or that of their companion to make up for the lack of fibre in their diet. If you move house or move your chinchilla to a new location within the house, it may also result in stress-related fur chewing. Whatever the underlying cause, fur chewing is a difficult habit to break so prevention is better than cure.

Dust baths

In the wild, chinchillas use fine sand to keep their coats clean and in prime condition and you need to provide this for them in the form of a dust bath. Chinchilla dust can be purchased from most pet shops. Never use ordinary sandpit or builders' sand as this is too coarse and will damage the chinchilla's fur and skin. The bath needs to be large and deep enough for your chinchilla to roll around in without injuring itself, so the dust should be about ten centimetres deep. Your chinchilla should be offered a bath once a day, for about 20 minutes. If it is left longer than this, it may become soiled and your chinchilla will not want to use it. Change the dust at least once a week.

Exercise and entertainment

Chinchillas are nocturnal, so will sleep most of the day. They are most active in the early evening and this is a good time to get them out for a run. Make sure they are supervised, as they tend to explore everything with their teeth, including electrical wires. Before allowing your chinchillas out to run around the house, you need to be confident that you can catch them again. Chinchillas can become tame with a little time and training. When your chinchilla comes forward, stroke it gently under the chin. Do not try to catch your chinchilla the first time this happens, just give a treat and let go, so your pet does not associate you with being caught. Use raisins in this process (a favourite treat) and offer them from your hand. Do take care, because a frightened chinchilla will stand on its back legs and spray urine in the face of any potential threat! Once your chinchilla is confidently taking treats and allowing you to stroke it, you should be able to let it out into a relatively small space to begin with and then try offering a treat so your pet learns to come to your hand. Still do not try to catch your chinchilla the first time, but give the treat and let go again a few times.

To pick up your chinchilla, support the whole body on your hand and gently restrain your chinchilla by holding the base of the tail. Never pick a chinchilla up by the tail – this can cause pain and serious injury. A frightened chinchilla that is being too harshly restrained will shed handfuls of fur so, if this happens, you are being far too rough.