

SMALL PETS 2

Caring for your chinchillas



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



Caring for your chinchillas

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

Where to buy a chinchilla

If you are buying a young chinchilla it's best to see the babies with the mother and ideally, other chinchillas from the same family. The adults should all look healthy and the cages should be clean and spacious. The breeder should ask you lots of questions and offer information about how to care for chinchillas.

There are now some chinchilla rescue organisations that may have unwanted adults or young looking for caring homes and charities like Blue Cross sometimes have chinchillas brought in for rehoming.

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

Housing

Chinchillas are usually kept as indoor pets and this is best for our climate. They can survive in quite cold temperatures but draughts can be very dangerous for them so they must be kept in a draught-free environment. They are prone to heatstroke in warm conditions, so never put their cage in a sunny window. Being nocturnal, it's probably best not to put them in a bedroom.

Chinchillas are quite large for a small pet and they are very active so they need plenty of space. The minimum

cage size for a pair is around 1m x 1.5m floor space, by 1.3m tall, with shelves at different heights. Chinchillas should be allowed out for supervised exercise as much as possible and at least once a day. In the bottom of the cage use dust-extracted bedding or shredded paper.

Chinchillas need an enclosed bed to sleep in during the day. This needs to be big enough for all the animals in the cage to curl up together if they want to, but there should be enough boxes for each chinchilla in case they want their own space. Wooden boxes are ideal, but whatever you use will eventually be chewed and need replacing.

Introducing chinchillas

To introduce a new chinchilla to one you already have, put them in separate cages side by side, about 10cm apart. This way they can smell each other without physical contact. Put their beds at opposite ends of the cages so they feel 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 week or so, move the cages and beds closer until the chinchillas are sleeping next to each other. It's important to introduce them slowly to avoid fights. When the two seem to be living happily side by side, put the existing chinchilla into the new chinchilla's cage. They may take to each other straight away or there

may be some initial squabbling. If this seems serious, separate them again for a few more days, but things should eventually settle down. It's usually easier to introduce animals of the opposite sex (make sure the male is neutered first) or to introduce a young chinchilla to an adult.

Exercise and training

Chinchillas are nocturnal, so they'll be asleep for most of the day. They are most active in the early evening so this is a good time to get them out for a run. Make sure they're supervised because they like to explore everything with their teeth and this can include 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 them the first time this happens, just give them a treat and let go so they don't associate you with being caught. Raisins are one of their favourite treats so offer these from your hand. Be careful 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 can let it out. Start with quite a small





space and then try offering a treat so your pet learns to come to your hand. Don't try to catch your chinchilla yet 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 them by holding the base of the tail. Never pick a chinchilla up by the tail – this can hurt them and could cause a serious injury. A frightened chinchilla that is being too strongly held will shed handfuls of fur so, if this happens, you are being far too rough.

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 bought 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 10cm deep. Chinchillas should be offered a bath once a day, for about 20 minutes. If the bath is left longer than this, it may become soiled and your chinchilla won't want to use it. Change the dust at least once a week. Also check their eyes because a build-up of dust can cause eye problems.

Feeding

Chinchillas are herbivores and, in their native South America, they eat grasses, 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 give them liver disease and greens which are too lush will cause colic or make them bloated. A diet lacking in fibre causes poor gut movement, allows their teeth to become overgrown and can even lead to fur chewing. They also need a high vitamin C diet, so they must not be fed rabbit mix.

Chinchilla foods are available to buy in pet shops. The pellet type is best because with mixes your chinchilla may pick out favourite bits, leading to an unbalanced diet. The pellets you feed your chinchilla should be rationed to about one tablespoon per day for a healthy adult.

Pellets are not enough on their own though – chinchillas also need a constant supply of good quality hay. Put the hay in a small rack and refill it every day. As with all animals, make sure there's a constant supply of fresh drinking water.

Treats

Raisins and sultanas are ideal treats for chinchillas and can be used as a reward in training too. Avoid feeding

your chinchilla too many though to make sure they still see raisins as a treat.

Some chinchillas also enjoy a little slice of fresh vegetable, like carrot, but take care not to give them too much because it may cause diarrhoea. Peanuts and sunflower seeds should be avoided, as they are too high in fat.

Do not give them too many treats because this can cause an upset stomach.

Dental care

As with all rodents, chinchilla teeth are always growing so they need plenty of hard material to eat and chew on. A piece of apple wood or rodent toys from pet shops for them to nibble will help prevent dental problems.

Sadly, even the best-kept chinchilla may develop problems with their teeth and these can become serious if left untreated. Signs to look out for include reluctance to eat, drooling and wetness under the chin and runny eyes. If your chinchilla shows any of these symptoms it's important to ask your vet to check their teeth.

Fur chewing

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 you need to spend lots of time keeping them entertained – grooming, playing and handling – but please do consider getting a second chinchilla for company.

Chinchillas that are not given hay may start to chew their own or their companions' fur to make up for the lack of fibre in their diet. If you move house or move your chinchilla to a new location in your house, this could cause stress-related fur chewing. Whatever the cause, fur chewing is a difficult habit to break so prevention is better than cure.



Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.



Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



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Registered charity no: 224392 (England and Wales), SC040154 (Scotland)