

Chinchillas

Chinchillas come from the Andes Mountains in South America. They used to be hunted for their skins, and were first imported into the United States and then into Europe as fur animals. The wild chinchilla is grey, but many other colours have now been developed.

Chinchillas are social animals, and so are best kept in pairs. The pairs should ideally be established while the animals are young. Females are larger and more aggressive than males, and if adults are to be introduced to one another, they should be kept in adjoining cages for a while, then the female introduced into the male's cage. Two males and two females can often be kept together in pairs established when they are young.



Housing

Chinchillas are usually kept in all-wire cages, and should have wooden ledges and branches to climb on and chew, and a nest-box to sleep in. All food and water containers should be earthenware or metal, as plastic will be chewed. Cages for pet chinchillas should be as large as possible, to allow plenty of room for exercise - a big floor-standing indoor aviary is ideal for chinchillas. We keep chinchillas indoors as they cannot cope with warm weather, or with damp.

Feeding

Chinchillas should be fed on a commercial chinchilla pellet, which contains about 18% protein. They must also be given good quality hay. Treats such as small pieces of apple and carrot are acceptable, as are raisins, which they love - but you should avoid any high-fat foods such as peanuts or sunflower seeds, as they will dull the coat and may lead to liver disease.

The best chinchilla pellets - and certainly most chinchillas enjoy them, but when buying a mix be aware that the most important item in the chinchilla's diet is hay. They need a large quantity of fibre in the diet both to keep their digestive tract working and to wear down their constantly-growing teeth. If a tasty mix (more tasty than pellets!) is fed ad-lib instead of in small, measured amounts, they may tend to eat too many pellets that are thin and very hard, and so need a lot of chewing. You can now buy chinchilla mixes which claim to be an alternative to much mix and not enough hay. Again, this can affect tooth wear, and may lead to overgrown teeth.

General Management

Chinchillas keep their fur in order by dust-bathing. A shallow, non-chewable pan of commercial 'chinchilla dust' should be put into the cage each day - but not left there permanently, as the animals tend to use it as a litter tray once they have dust-bathed. Chinchillas are nocturnal - and after dark are very active and very agile - so are best not housed in bedrooms where people are trying to sleep! Chinchillas should be picked up gently round the shoulders, if necessary using the base of the tail as further support.

Breeding

Chinchillas have a breeding season which runs from November to May. The gestation period is 111 - 114 days, and there are up to three young in a litter. The young chinchillas should not be weaned until they are at least 8 weeks old. Both male and female chinchillas can be neutered to prevent unwanted litters.

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