

Chinchilla Care



975 Iris Avenue
Imperial Beach, CA 91932-3438
(619) 934-6007
weecompanions@aol.com
www.weecompanions.com

Wee Companions Philosophy

Our mission is to rescue guinea pigs, rats, hamsters, and other small exotic mammals from shelters, places of abandonment, and from persons relinquishing their pets. Whenever possible, we offer a safe house to these animals, irrespective of age, temperament, or health status. These animals will receive veterinary care and socialization in the hopes that they will be placed in a "forever" home. Animals given Sanctuary Status will be placed in our Foster Care Network to live out their lives in comfort and with love. We are also focused on educating foster parents, school children and others on the care, feeding and prevention of unwanted litters of these animals.

Are You the Right Home for a Chinchilla?

Chinchillas can be an awesome addition to the right home. However, chinchillas have very specific requirements in order to live a long and healthy life and require a serious commitment on the part of potential caregivers.

1. Are you able to provide a temperature controlled environment?
Chinchillas originated in the Andes Mountains and require temperatures between 60 and 74 degrees Fahrenheit, which is much lower than most homes naturally provide. Therefore an air conditioner is a necessity, not a luxury. Chinchillas need to be housed inside.
2. Do you have enough time to spend with your pet? Chinchillas are very regressive animals and will tend to become more antisocial and possibly even aggressive if left without attention for long periods of time. Because chinchillas cannot free range in most homes like cats and dogs, chinchillas are often left in their cage without interaction for long periods of time if an owner is too busy. Before adopting a chinchilla, make sure that you can spend at least 1 hour a day on average. More time is always better!
3. Do you have enough money to spend on veterinary care? Chinchillas are not cheap animals. Examinations start at about \$50 without any tests or medications. Vet bills for chinchilla ailments can quickly run into hundreds of dollars.
4. Are you prepared for a 16 – 25 year commitment? This time span will extend through high school, through sports, meetings, artistic performances and possibly college. Will there be time in a growing child's schedule to continue to care for their chinchilla?
5. Does anyone in the family have allergies? Some people are allergic to chinchillas, their dust or hay, especially children that already have reactive airways disease. As well as respiratory symptoms people can develop hives (itchy bumps on the skin) when handling a chinchilla as a result of the dust that they bathe in. Chinchillas have to eat large amounts of hay daily for their health; many people are allergic to grasses and therefore hays.
6. Do you want a pet that will snuggle with you and be carted around like a cat, constantly being bundled up and cuddled? If so, then a chin is probably not the right pet for you. Think of chins as "chinavision." Hysterical to watch, but often times not very interactive. Chinchillas make wonderful pets, as long as you understand that each chin has their own temperament, their own personality, their own style. Some love to sit with their owners and watch TV, others want to run the entire time they are out of their cage, using their humans only as a perch for a few moments or a jungle gym. Some don't like to be handled at all and will cack at you and bark in their cage. As with any other species (including humans), chins each have their own quirks and it's important that you accept them for who they are.
7. Chinchillas are not a good pet for small children. They have a very delicate bone structure and should only be handled by children with intense supervision. Children have been known to crush a chinchilla's ribcage by handling them too roughly and without proper supervision, resulting in the chinchilla's death.
8. Chinchillas are social animals. In many cases, they get along very well with a cage mate. It is easier to place two already familiar cage mates together, or to purchase two kits of the same sex and start them out as cage mates early, but some chins may prefer to be alone and if your Chinchilla is one of those that prefer to be alone they may spray urine, bite the other chinchilla's fur, or fight with them, causing severe injury and even death. For this reason, if you have more than one chinchilla, you should always have a spare cage handy for those "just in case" moments. If a fight breaks out, you may not have time to go get a spare cage or a carrier before the fight ends up in severe injuries or death. Having that spare cage/carrier handy could make all the difference.

Before you Adopt a Chinchilla ...

1. Which adults in the family will be the primary caretakers?
2. Does everyone in your family want a chinchilla?
3. Chinchillas are considered exotic animals and their veterinary care is expensive, bills can easily reach hundreds of dollars. Are you prepared to provide this level of care, should it be necessary for your chinchillas?
4. Are you prepared for your chinchilla to live 16 – 25 years?
5. Is anyone in your home allergic to chinchillas or hay?
6. Do you have an appropriate cage and supplies?
7. Do you have animals that could endanger the chinchillas?
8. Will you be able to supervise any children around these chinchillas?
9. Have you had chinchillas before? Where are they now?
10. Are you allowed to have chinchillas in your house / apartment?
11. If you move, get married, have a baby or if the kids lose interest, are you prepared to keep your chinchillas?

Chinchilla facts.

1. Chins are very active. They love to jump, climb, and perch. Run time in a controlled environment is enjoyable for both them and you. Chins are crepuscular, which means their busy times are dawn and dusk. That doesn't mean they won't run on their wheels all night long, but just that their "usual" busy time is pretty predictable. Chinchillas require a maximum temperature of 75 degrees in their habitat, but it's much safer to keep them at lower temps, in case something should happen to the air conditioning, like a power outage. You also have to factor humidity in to any temperature. A house that sits at 75 with 75% humidity is a death trap for a chin. An air conditioner is an absolute must in areas where you get high heat and humidity.
2. Chinchillas are also very adept at squeezing into tight spaces. They can squeeze in to any small space and you may not be able to get them out. Keep that in mind when you think of areas where you would let your chinchilla run. If a chinchilla can get it's head through a space, it will be able to get it's body through also.
3. Chinchillas need play time and companionship every day if you want them to be friendly and to trust you. I recommend no less than 30 minutes of SUPERVISED free roam time in a "Chinchilla Proof" room per night, (this is a good time to offer their bath). You should never take a new Chinchilla out for free time until they are completely comfortable with you. Chasing a Chinchilla to place them back in their cage is not good for them and raises stress levels which could lead to diarrhea, loss of appetite, lethargy, etc... Not to mention Chinchillas do not forget such things and will continue to be afraid of you.

Housing your Chinchillas

Selecting the most appropriate cage for a chinchilla can be a confusing and somewhat expensive process. With their increasing popularity as pets, there has been an increasing variety of cages marketed for chinchillas. Think of the cage as an investment, it's better and more economical to spend a little more in the beginning for the perfect cage than to settle for a cheaper cage and upgrade later.

Choosing the correct cage is one of the most important aspects of chinchilla husbandry. An incorrect or inadequate cage can be costly; not only in monetary terms because cages can be expensive but also in health terms for the chinchilla.

Chinchillas are rock hoppers and prefer space to move; the bigger the cage the better. There is something truly wonderful about watching a chinchilla (or chinchillas) exploring their environment and hopping about safely, knowing they cannot fall too far and damage themselves. The ideal cage for a chinchilla is low and wide rather than high and narrow. Tall cages can be modified with wooden shelves so that the chinchilla cannot fall more than 18 inches. The minimum cage size for one chinchilla is 24" x 24" x 24".

Popular chinchilla cages include the Ferret Nation and Critter Nation, manufactured by Midwest Cages, Martins Cages (www.martinscages.com) and Quality Cages (www.qualitycages.com). Many chinchilla caretakers have opted to replace the trays that come with the Ferret and Critter Nations with high sided custom trays from Bass Equipment (www.bassequipment.com) which do a better job at keeping litter and poop in the cage. It is important if you have mesh shelves that the mesh be no larger than ½" x ½". Larger mesh or wire openings on shelves can and do lead to broken limbs.

Keeping the chinchillas comfortable in mesh cages is very important and is achieved by using wooden shelves, nest boxes, or platforms which can be easily replaced or moved. This can also prevent ulcerative pododermatitis (bumblefoot) which can develop in unclean cages or where there is extreme pressure on the feet (such as permanently standing on mesh).

Small, boring cages can lead to behavioral problems such as repetitive stress behaviors and fur chewing, therefore, toys etc can also be added but care must be taken that the fixtures and fittings do not damage the cage mesh and lead to injury.

A Wheel and Other Toys

A wheel is quite important to a happy Chinchilla, especially one that is cage bound all of the time. Chinchillas are very active animals. Make sure the wheel is "Chinchilla Safe" in that it has a solid running surface so they do not cause injury to themselves and that it has no cross bars that a chinchilla could get a leg or tail caught in. Wheels should be no smaller than 14" in diameter preferably 16". Bucket wheels are the best choice just make sure they are sturdy enough to hold the weight of the chinchilla when full grown. Some popular styles of chinchilla wheels are the Chin Spin, the Flying Saucer, the Ed Wheel, the Silver Surfer and the Leo Braun (which is no long produced). Chinchilla wheels are not cheap, and should be thought of as an investment that will last for years and years. In the long run it is cheaper to make the investment of a good wheel than to keep buying cheaper versions and replacing them. Other toys in the cage are a good idea as well. Wooden chew toys that hang from the cage are perfect. There are some homemade ones that work very well. Also, wooden hamster and gerbil chews are usually safe. Generally anything that is safe for parrots is safe for chinchillas. A list of safe woods can be found at www.chinchillas2home.co.uk/safewoods.htm.

Bedding and Cleaning

Appropriate bedding or litter depends on the type of cage you are using. Cedar is toxic to small animals and should never be used. If using woods we recommend hard woods such as Aspen or recycled paper pulp products. Some people like to use fleece to line their cages covering towels. Spot cleaning can work on a daily or every other day basis but full cleaning needs to be done weekly.

Chinchilla Dietary Needs

Chinchillas are herbivores and require a low fat, high fiber diet to maintain optimum health. The diet of a chinchilla should be kept very simple. Quality chinchilla pellets, hay and water are all a chin really needs. Treats should be limited in number and type. Most illnesses that the domestic chinchilla will suffer from will be directly or indirectly caused by dietary influences

Chinchillas have adapted to live on a very tough, fibrous diet that is actually quite nutritionally poor. To extract as much goodness from their food as possible, a chinchilla will eat some of their droppings (as do rabbits). This practice is called coprography.

Coprography may also help to maintain the correct balance of intestinal flora within the gut, and also enables the chinchilla to absorb B Vitamins that are produced in the caecum (part of the gut) by the micro-flora.

Chinchillas in the wild will eat a variety of plants, shrubs and grasses. They will consume stalks, stems, leaves, shoots, fruits, seeds and roots, depending on what time of year it is. It is also reported that they may eat the odd grub too, but I believe that this is probably more by accident than design, as chinchillas would not take the time to wash their food.

This tough, fibrous diet that chinchillas have evolved to deal with, requires a pretty good set of teeth, and this is where rodents excel. Chinchillas have 20 teeth, all of which grow continuously throughout the chinchilla's life. A chinchilla requires the kind of food that requires much chewing, just as they would receive in the wild. Often a diet that is too low in fiber will result in the teeth not getting worn down correctly, and dental problems may result. Plenty of fiber is also essential for the chinchilla to maintain a healthy digestion too.

Therefore, it stands to reason that we need to give a domestic chinchilla a high fiber diet in captivity also, to maintain health.

Pellets

A quality chinchilla pellet should be provided. Good choices include Oxbow, American Pet Diner (APD), Mazuri, Purina Advanced Nutrition Rabbit Show or Pro, Nutrena Naturewise 16%, and Tradition. Foods that contain anything other than green pellets should be avoided as they are mainly treats and can upset the chinchilla's delicate gastrointestinal balance.

grass type hay (Timothy, orchard) and fresh water should be available at all times. Treats should be limited to once or twice a week and can consist of unsweetened bite sized shredded wheat, a few rolled oats, dried rosehips, dried hibiscus flowers, dried dandelion greens.

Hay

In addition to the pellets, it is essential that a chinchilla eats at least a good handful of good-quality hay daily.

In captivity, hay is the main source of fiber in a chinchilla's diet. It should be of good quality, sweet smelling, and definitely not moldy, damp or dusty. Hay maintains good digestion, helps to ensure correct tooth-wear and may also help to prevent cage-boredom too.

Fiber is made up of different components: cellulose, hemi-cellulose, and lignin - the lignin bit is the least digestible ADF.

Chinchillas seem to do better (gut and tooth-wise) on a type of diet higher in ADF (acid detergent fiber). Timothy hay contains a minimum of 32% fiber of which @ 25.10% is ADF. Other acceptable grass hays are orchard and bluegrass. Additional types of hay may be given in moderation to increase variety; these include oat, three way grain and alfalfa. Alfalfa is high in calcium and should be given in moderation.

Water

Fresh, filtered water should be provided daily via a hanging bottle. Chinchillas will drink more if the water is cool and fresh. No additives are needed in the water to affect taste. Bottles are the preferred mode of delivery for hygiene reasons; bottles and spouts need to be cleaned weekly.

Healthy Treats:

With the exception of wood, treats should be limited to once or twice a week. Below is a list of safe treats that the one or two treats a week can be selected from.

- Wood treats can be given on a daily basis. Safe woods include apple, pear, pecan, willow, mulberry, manzanita, cholla and elm. Most chinchillas get just as excited about receiving a wood treat as they are to get food treats. You can give a twig or two daily, but branches will last a little longer. Chinchillas love to strip off and eat the bark, which provides an excellent fibrous treat that is good for the teeth. It closely resembles their natural diet too.
- Alfalfa Hay - May be given once or twice a week. High in calcium and protein too. A tasty and healthy treat.
- Dried rose hips, dried hibiscus flowers, dried chamomile, dried dandelion greens.
- Rolled oats
- Unsweetened, spoon sized shredded wheat

Treats to Avoid:

- Dried fruit.
- Fresh fruit
- Fresh vegetables
- Sunflower Seeds/Peanuts
- Commercially Made Treats - Some types of chinchilla treats available in pet shops are actually quite unsuitable. Try to avoid anything that contains seeds, nuts, oils and sugars as these will not be healthy for your chinchilla.
- Human Food

Chinchilla bath time ...

Chinchillas need dust baths no less than 3 times a week. It is very important not to leave your Chinchillas bath in the cage with them. They will poop, pee, and sleep in it and it can actually have the reverse effect. To keep your Chinchilla looking, smelling, and feeling its best you must offer it a bath separate from the cage floor 3 times a week at the MINIMUM. Super pet makes a very nice bath house for Chinchillas; you can also use a corner litter pan you would find for ferrets, or a small kitty litter box. Another good choice is a pie plate. The 9 inch pie plates are the perfect size. Make certain if you use any kind of glass or ceramic dust bath house/pan that you are there to supervise and NEVER place it on a shelf. For Kits you can use a small ceramic bowl if you prefer. If your Chinchilla is not used to the bath house and you choose to use one you may have to show them what it's for. Some Chinchillas prefer to not use an enclosed bath house so if your Chinchilla doesn't seem to get the hang of a bath house after the first couple of tries then you'll have to go to an alternate method.

Toys for chinchillas

Rotating a variety of safe fun toys will keep your chinchilla entertained, stimulated and exercised. Your chinchilla's enjoyment will also reward you as you watch him enjoy his toys!

Depending on the size of your chinchilla's living area or yours for that matter the creation of a play box may be considered. It should be big enough to encourage running, may have different levels and filled with safe toys for your pet. Play time in this kind of play box set up should be daily and keeping to the

same time helps your guinea pig know what to expect. If your guinea pig's living area is large so no play box is needed toys can be rotated through on a weekly basis.

Hidey Holes

Wooden, untreated sea grass or hay "hide outs" can be positioned where ever but corners make an ideal spot. Chinchillas love to go hide in a house during play time and for sleeping. Wooden houses can serve a double purpose as a chew toy. Houses made of tasty hay will quickly be devoured but will be thoroughly enjoyed during the process.

Cardboard boxes turned upside down with doorways and windows cut into them can be an amusing toy for chinchillas and humans alike. Large cardboard tubes are also popular during play time. Paper bags can bring hours of amusement and can double as a hay storage area when packed with tasty hay.

Chew Toys

Chinchillas are voracious chewers and most love wood of any type, grape vine balls and wreaths, willow balls and wreaths. Many bird toys work well for chinchillas just be sure that they are made of a wood that is safe for chinchillas.

Never place a chinchilla in a rolling ball, even the largest size. Chinchillas will overheat and do not move or walk in a fashion that is conducive to move the ball. Always consider the safety of your toys.

Checklist of Supplies for Chinchillas

- Water bottle
- Food dish
- Hay holder
- Housing - Large cage
- Toys – Safe wood toys
- Safe litter – such as aspen shavings, CareFresh, Yesterday's News.
- Food – Fresh Hay, quality chinchilla pellets, fresh water.
- Veterinarian – It's important you have a vet that has experience with chinchillas. All animals can require vet care and having one in advance provides peace of mind.

Resources

Chins and Hedgies.
www.chins-n-hedgies.com

CHINformative
www.chinformative.com

Cages
www.martinscages.com
www.qualitycages.com
Ferret Nation or Critter Nation by Midwest Cages
Bass Equipment – Custom pans for Ferret and Critter Nation cages – www.bassequipment.com