

The National Chinchilla Society's Guide to Keeping Pet  
Chinchillas



Brevicaudata & Lanigera

**NCS**

## **What is a Chinchilla?**

A chinchilla is a rodent with extremely dense, beautiful soft fur. They are intelligent, active creatures with big personalities. They originate from the top of the Andes in South America, where it is cold and arid. They are crepuscular (not nocturnal) which means they are most active at dusk and dawn.

## **Do they make good pets?**

They make wonderful pets for older teenagers and adults, but not for young children. Under all that fur, they have a very delicate bone structure which means they can easily be injured if handled roughly or squeezed. These inquisitive, energetic animals can move very quickly but are rock hoppers as opposed to accomplished climbers (although they will climb up the side of a cage). Like all species, they have their own individual personalities, some like to be cuddled and handled, others do not. Generally, they are gentle creatures but the occasional one will sometimes bite, especially if they feel threatened or scared. Although it is unusual, they can also “slip their fur” which is a defence mechanism and a way of getting away from predators in their native habitat. This will initially result in a bald patch, but the fur will grow back, although this can take a few months.

They are relatively quiet creatures, vocalising very little. The most common noises being mothers and very young kits making comforting gentle squeaking noises to each other and on rare occasions, adults will let out a “hooting” call, which in the wild they use to warn the rest of the herd of danger.

Although crepuscular, they are happy to interact during the day. They live a long time, normally between 8 and 12 years, but can live up to around twenty, so they are a long-time commitment. This needs to be carefully considered when taking them on as a family pet. They are relatively easy and inexpensive to keep, just requiring suitable housing, good husbandry practise and appropriate feed. They can be kept as a single pet or after a suitable period of introduction, as same sex pairs (note: although this is usually possible, this is not guaranteed to be successful).

Chinchillas should have access to a sand bath with special chinchilla sand/dust, preferably for 10 to 15 minutes every day. This sand can be sieved to remove any droppings. Having regular sand baths helps keep the fur clean and luxurious and although chinchillas being exhibited are groomed with special combs, this should not be necessary for animals not being entered into a show. Chinchillas moult or “prime”, this normally starts at the head and gradually over weeks, or even months, reaches the tail. This will result in small amounts of soft loose fur gathering in the cage and sometimes a horse shoe shaped priming line is visible on the back of the animal.

## **Housing**

Many cages sold as being suitable for chinchillas, are not. Chinchillas should not be housed in tall cages without separate floors, there should be a maximum of 60cm or 2 feet between floors and even less with young kits present. Having multiple shelves and/or hammocks in a tall cage will not protect them from injury. Although they are rock hoppers, they are not very sure footed and falls are not uncommon. A fall can cause serious injury including broken bones, damage to internal organs and misalignment of the teeth that then leads to malocclusion months or even years down the line. There should be no plastic or rubber in the cage since this can lead to a blockage of the

intestines, which is almost always fatal. Cages are best made from strong  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch galvanised wire mesh with a pull-out metal tray underneath on which dropping can collect. Chinchillas appreciate access to wooden shelves, wooden houses etc. but these should be made out of suitable untreated wood (e.g. pine). Shelves and houses made out of wood-based products such as plywood and MDF are not suitable because they contain glue and inevitably, they will be chewed. Solid wooden ladders may be provided, but any open ladder including those made of wire, can be dangerous since there is a risk of legs falling through the gaps and the animal being left hanging.

The chinchilla's teeth grow continuously throughout its life. Therefore, they need a constant supply of safe materials to gnaw on. Popular ones include suitable untreated, clean, dried woods (e.g. pine, hazel and apple) and pumice stone. Feeding good hay, as well as providing important fibre in their diet, also helps wear down the teeth. The teeth of a healthy adult chinchilla are deep yellow/orange in colour, creamy/white teeth are an indication of poor diet or other issues (although this is a fairly common temporary condition in heavily pregnant/lactating females).

With their thick fur coats, **healthy adult** chinchillas can tolerate cold (anything above freezing point), the enemies being heat and damp. Inevitably, they struggle in temperatures above c.24°C. To prevent overheating, direct sunshine (including through windows) should always be avoided and they should never be housed outdoors or put in a run in the garden. Fans, air conditioning units and cooling tiles can be used to help keep them comfortable. Living in a damp environment can not only lead to respiratory problems, but it also affects the fur which impacts on their ability to stay warm.

Although it is not essential for a chinchilla to have "playtime" outside of their cage, if you choose to do so, they need to be fully supervised at all times since they will chew wires, skirting boards etc. Care should also be taken to ensure they do not overheat as a result of over vigorous exercise, especially in hot weather. In general, they are not afraid of other animals and pets, however, caution needs to be exercised since some species can pass on diseases to chinchillas (e.g. mice, rats and rabbits). Currently there are no commercially available vaccinations developed for chinchillas.

## Feeding

Chinchillas have specific nutritional requirements and their diet should consist of a good quality meadow or timothy hay, fresh clean water and a quality chinchilla pellet which meets their protein and vitamin needs (which, for example, is much higher than say for a rabbit). Chinchillas rarely over eat, so food and water should be available at all times. However, food bowls and hay racks should not just be continuously topped up, since pellets and hay can become stale/damp/contaminated and it is important to be able to monitor how much the animal is eating. Lack of appetite is often one of the first signs of a health issue. Mixed foods, including those sold specifically for chinchillas, should always be avoided. These are likely to lead to selective feeding (i.e. they pick out their favourite bits), which more often than not, will result in an inadequate diet and health issues. Chinchillas should not be fed fresh vegetables, fruits, seeds or nuts. Their natural environment is relatively barren and their digestive system is unable to cope with such "rich" foods. Commercial sugary treats should also be avoided for the same reason. All treats should be limited, but some suitable ones can be found in the kitchen cupboard. These include a teaspoon of old fashioned (not instant) porridge oats or wheatgerm and a small piece of Weetabix or shredded wheat. Some dried

herbs such as dandelion and nettle are also appropriate treats/supplements; as are limited quantities of grass pellets, commercially available dried grass and alfalfa (Lucerne) cubes. Although chinchillas love raisins, these should be rationed to 1 or 2 a week and not given to young animals or adults who develop or are prone to, soft droppings. The chinchilla's digestive system is not robust and any mouldy, contaminated or unsuitable food can lead to serious health issues and even death. Incorrect diet and housing are two major causes of health problems in pet chinchillas.

### **Buying a Chinchilla**

Kits are weaned at around 8 weeks old and should not be re-homed until they are a minimum of 12 weeks, this is so the breeder can ensure they are thriving independently from their mother. Members of the National Chinchilla Society (NCS) sometimes sell chinchillas as pets, especially at the end of the show season (late March/early April). However, the NCS does not inspect premises nor recommend breeders and many members do not attend shows. Equally, a Pedigree is not a guarantee of quality or health, it is simply a record of how an animal has been bred. If you currently have or think you may have in the future, any ambitions to breed and show quality chinchillas, then the first step is to attend the NCS shows (details can be found on the website). Here you can learn how to identify qualities and meet and talk to experienced breeders who will be able to guide you in terms of purchasing the right animals and on best practise breeding and husbandry methods. Even if you do not intend to exhibit and just want a chinchilla as a pet, attending the shows is not only a great day out, but also an opportunity to draw on the knowledge of those attending and maybe to find your perfect chinchilla (ask around at the show!).

Chinchillas are also available in some pet shops and are advertised on the internet. Whatever chinchilla you buy, it should be bright eyed (with no wetness or discharge), "in good flesh" and active. Animals that sit hunched, are disinterested in their surroundings or underweight (i.e. they feel bony) should be avoided. Many people buying a chinchilla as a pet prefer to buy young animals in the belief they can "mould" its personality, but this is not a reality and buying an older animal (6 to 7 months plus) , means that if it is happy to be held then, it will remain that way (unless of course it is in anyway mistreated).

Females are generally larger than males but there is no difference in terms of their suitability as pets, it is down to the individual animal. Males and females can be kept as same sex pairs, the exception being if paired males are kept in close proximity to females since competition and aggression between them is likely to occur when they sense a female is in season.

### **Why join the National Chinchilla Society (NCS)?**

Membership of the NCS allows you to exhibit at the shows that take place all over England and in Scotland. You will receive 5 gazettes per year that are full of articles, including ones on health, breeding and exhibiting and lots of top tips on all aspects of husbandry and care. You can draw on the expertise of the society's members, most of whom are always very willing to help. You can apply online or contact the National Secretary whose details are on the website ([www.nationalchinchillasociety.co.uk](http://www.nationalchinchillasociety.co.uk)).

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