

CHINCHILLA CARE GUIDE

Chinchilla lanigera

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Chinchillas are intelligent, agile, and possess the densest fur of any land animal — which is impressive until you realize they will shed patches of it on you if you startle them. They are rewarding companions when their specific environmental, dietary, and social needs are met.



NATURAL HISTORY & BEHAVIOR

- Native to the cool, dry Andes Mountains of South America — their care requirements reflect this origin directly
- Crepuscular: most active at dawn and dusk, though many adjust to household routines over time
- Agile jumpers capable of leaping up to 3 feet vertically — enclosure height and security matter accordingly
- Generally bond closely with their owners, but may release patches of fur (“**fur slip**”) or spray urine if frightened or improperly restrained
- Staring at you with apparent judgment is normal behavior and not personal



DIET & NUTRITION

Food	Amount	Notes
High-quality grass hay (Timothy, orchard, meadow)	Unlimited, always available	Foundation of the diet — non-negotiable
Timothy-based chinchilla pellets	Measured daily portion	Supplement to hay, not a replacement
Fresh clean water	Always available	Sipper bottle preferred
Alfalfa hay or alfalfa pellets	Juveniles and pregnant/nursing females only	Do not feed to healthy adults — too rich

- Chinchillas consume most of their food during evening hours — this does not make them good dinner party companions
- Treats commonly contribute to obesity and gastrointestinal disease — resist the urge

Foods to avoid entirely:

- Fruits, nuts, seeds, sugary or high-fat treats of any kind
- Sudden diet changes — introduce any new foods gradually over several days
- Anything marketed as a “chinchilla birthday cake” — this is not a real product category and should not be encouraged



HOUSING REQUIREMENTS

- Minimum enclosure size: **3 ft × 2 ft × 2 ft** — larger is strongly encouraged, and they will use every inch
- Multiple levels and platforms for climbing and jumping — vertical space is as important as floor space
- Hiding areas: tunnels, hay huts, or plastic igloos — security is essential for a prey species
- Untreated, non-toxic wood or branches for chewing — their teeth grow continuously and require constant wear
- **Solid flooring** recommended — avoid wire flooring, which causes foot injuries

Safe bedding options:

- Recycled paper bedding or shredded non-inked paper
- **Avoid pine or cedar shavings and corn cob** bedding — respiratory irritation and impaction risk



TEMPERATURE & HUMIDITY

Parameter	Target
Ideal temperature range	50--68°F (10--20°C)
Maximum safe temperature	Below 80°F — heat stroke risk increases above this
Humidity	Below 50%
Direct sunlight / heat sources	Avoid entirely

Heat stroke is a common emergency in chinchillas. Temperatures above 80°F are dangerous. Chinchillas cannot sweat and have no effective mechanism for cooling themselves down. Air conditioning is not a luxury for this species.



DUST BATHING & GROOMING

- Dust bathing is essential for maintaining coat and skin health — it is not optional and water baths are not a substitute
- Provide commercial chinchilla dust for 5–10 minutes per session (up to 30 minutes is acceptable)
- Offer dust baths **3–4 times weekly**
- Remove the dust bath container after use to prevent contamination and respiratory irritation from prolonged exposure



EXERCISE & ENRICHMENT

- Supervised out-of-cage exercise for **30–60 minutes daily** — chinchillas are highly active and confinement alone is not sufficient
- Safe chew toys: untreated wood, hay tunnels, and cardboard tubes — chewing is a dental necessity, not a hobby
- Chinchillas are curious and athletic — enrichment variety reduces stress and prevents destructive behavior

HANDLING GUIDELINES

- Handle gently and minimally — avoid lifting them off their feet when possible, as they strongly dislike it
- **Fur slip** may occur if a chinchilla becomes frightened or struggles — released fur patches regrow but handling technique matters
- Most chinchillas rarely bite unless severely stressed — stress is usually the handler's fault, not the chinchilla's
- Build trust gradually through consistent, calm daily interaction — patience is the entire strategy

NORMAL CHINCHILLA BEHAVIORS

- Producing large numbers of small, dry fecal pellets throughout the day — a sign of a healthy gut
- Coprophagy (eating fecal pellets) for nutrient absorption — normal, necessary, not a cause for concern
- Frequent chewing of objects in the environment — this is dental maintenance, not mischief
- Urinating primarily in one area of the enclosure — makes cleaning easier, not a behavioral problem
- Peak activity during evening and early morning hours
- Staring at you with apparent judgment — this is normal and not personal

COMMON MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Condition	Signs	Notes
Dental disease (malocclusion)	Drooling, difficulty eating, facial swelling, weight loss	Most common health issue in chinchillas — linked to inadequate hay intake
GI disease (bloat, diarrhea, constipation)	Reduced fecal output, appetite loss, abdominal distension	Often triggered by diet change, stress, or incorrect feeding
Skin conditions (abscesses, fungal, fur chewing)	Hair loss, skin lesions, excessive grooming	Fur chewing may also indicate stress or nutritional deficiency
Heat stroke	Lethargy, rapid breathing, weakness, collapse	Emergency — cool environment immediately and call us
Respiratory infections	Sneezing, nasal discharge, labored breathing	Often linked to bedding or environmental irritants
Eye infections	Discharge, swelling, squinting	Requires veterinary evaluation — do not self-treat
Reproductive disorders	Abdominal swelling, lethargy, straining	Includes pyometra and pregnancy complications in females
Penile fur rings (males)	Straining to urinate, grooming hindquarters excessively	Requires prompt veterinary attention to prevent injury

PREVENTIVE CARE

- Annual wellness examinations — chinchillas hide illness well, and by the time signs are obvious the problem is rarely new

- Routine dental monitoring at every visit — dental disease is the leading cause of decline in pet chinchillas
- Stable diet and environmental conditions — consistency is the single most effective preventive measure
- Daily monitoring of appetite and fecal output at home — changes here are usually the first detectable sign of illness

If your chinchilla stops eating, shows reduced fecal output, has labored breathing, develops swelling anywhere on the body, or seems suddenly lethargic — call us. Chinchillas decline quickly and early intervention makes a significant difference.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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