The chinchilla is a rodent which is closely related to the guinea pig and porcupine. The pet chinchilla's wild counterpart inhabits the Andes Mountain areas of Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. In the wild state, they live at high altitudes in rocky, barren mountainous regions. They have been bred in captivity since 1923, primarily for their pelts. Some chinchillas that were fortunate enough to have substandard furs were sold as pets or research animals. Today, chinchillas are raised for both purposes: pets and pelts.

*Chinchilla laniger* is the main species bred today. They tend to be fairly clean, odorless and friendly pets but usually are shy and easily frightened. They do not make very good pets for young children, since they tend to be high-strung and very active. The fur is extremely soft and beautiful bluish grey in color thus leading to their popularity in the pelt industry. Current color mutations include white, silver, beige and black.

### Handling

Chinchillas are not very difficult to handle and rarely bite. Usually cupping one hand under the rump and cradling the midsection with the other hand is a good way to hold them safely. Be careful when handling them, however, due to the risk of 'fur slip'. 'Fur slip' is the patchy shedding of hair that occurs when the fur is grasped or roughly handled. To avoid this condition, always support the body when you are holding a chinchilla. Although they rarely bite, they still are capable of it, if agitated. In addition, they may urinate when annoyed. As with any animal, always be in control when holding or restraining your pet to avoid injuries to either of you.

### Housing

Chinchillas must be kept in an area that is well lit, adequately ventilated, and cool & dry. They do not tolerate high heat or humidity, and they thrive at lower temperatures. The optimal temperature is 60 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Wire mesh cages are typically used for chinchillas, with or without a solid floor. Wooden cages should not be used since chinchillas are noted gnawers. These animals tend to be very active and acrobatic, thus requiring a lot of space. An ideal enclosure would be multi-leveled and measure at least 6ft X 6ft X 3ft with a one foot square nest box.

Dust baths should be provided at least once or twice weekly. These must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Finely powdered volcanic ash is used to keep the fur clean and well groomed. Several brands of 'chinchilla dust' are marketed. A home-made alternative consists of 9 parts of silver sand to...
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1 part of Fuller's earth. This bath should only be provided for a short time during the day, otherwise there would be a perpetual dust cloud in the cage.

Chinchillas can be housed with other, same gender chinchillas but should be housed separately if there is fighting or resource guarding.

Diet

Commercial chinchilla pellets are available, but they are not available through all pet shops and feed stores. When the chinchilla variety is not in stock, a standard rabbit or guinea pig pellet can be fed in its place. Chinchillas tend to eat with their hands and often throw out a lot of pellets thus causing wastage.

Timothy, or other grass hay, can be fed to chinchillas in addition to their pellets. Alfalfa hay is not recommended due to its high calcium content relative to phosphorus. Hay is a beneficial supplement to the diet for nutritional and psychological reasons. Grass hay adds additional fiber to the diet while serving as an item for the pet to chew on. Any hay fed should be free from mold and vermin contamination.

Fresh vegetables, including green leafy vegetables should be provided but in moderation. Dried fruits and nuts or seeds can be excellent treats for chinchillas but should be fed in small amounts only.

Chinchillas can drink water from sipper-type bottles or bowls.

Common Medical Problems

Malocclusion / Slobber
This condition is characterized by drooling of saliva onto the fur under the chin. Other signs include inappetence, sores in the mouth, and loss of fur under the chin. The underlying cause is overgrowth of the molars (cheek teeth). Temporary treatment involves clipping of the affected teeth and proper mineral supplementation. Providing wood or mineral blocks for the chinchilla to chew may aid in prevention, but many cases have a genetic basis.

GI Stasis/Ileus
GI Stasis (also known as ileus) often occurs secondary to some other condition, such as pain, a stressful or frightening event, or other underlying disease. The signs of GI stasis are often decreased appetite and decreased or abnormal appearing stool. The pet may also be lethargic.

It is important for the pet to be examined by a veterinarian if these signs are seen to rule out other causes of these signs and start treatment as soon as possible. In some cases it is mild and the appetite and stool production are mildly decreased and then improve on their own. In other cases, there is a complete loss of appetite and stool production, and the pet is lethargic.
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The rule of thumb regarding the seriousness of the loss of appetite and decreased stool is:

- Loss of appetite but otherwise acting normal should be investigated within 48 hours. Some pets may go through a slow down and then pick up again in a day. The key here is that the pet is still active and alert, and is still producing stools.
- Loss of appetite accompanied by obvious lethargy or depression should be considered an emergency and should be investigated immediately. Another important sign is that no stools are being produced.

Treatment of GI stasis often involves rehydration, syringe feeding, and medications for pain and GI motility.

**Heat Stroke**

High temperatures and high humidity are not tolerated well by chinchillas. Most problems occur in situations where the cage is placed in direct sunlight and poorly ventilated. Affected animals will be lying on their sides and panting. They also feel hot to the touch because of elevated body temperature. Animals in high humidity will also exhibit unkempt, damp fur. Treatment involves misting or bathing them in cold water or applying rubbing alcohol to their foot pads. Veterinary assistance should be sought for further recommendations and treatment.

**Pneumonia (Respiratory Infection)**

Pneumonia is another common condition observed in chinchillas which is caused by a number of disease agents. Bordetella, Pasteurella, Pseudomonas and E. coli are a few of the bacterial species commonly associated with the syndrome. Damp, drafty housing often predisposes the pet to this condition. Clinical signs include discharge from the eyes and nose, loss of appetite and rough hair coat. Death may result from this respiratory disease. Treatment involves supportive care and antibiotics.

**Ringworm**

Trichophyton mentagrophytes is the typical agent in chinchillas with ringworm. It causes hair loss and scabby red lesions on the nose, feet, and around the eyes. This is a very serious problem for fur ranchers due to the damage to the chinchilla’s hair coat. Treatment involves the use of griseofulvin as prescribed by your veterinarian.

**Fur Slip**

Chinchillas often lose patches of fur when roughly handled. Another common cause is fighting among other chinchillas. This condition does not injure the pet but ruins the pelt of animals raised for fur.

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