

Chinchilla

Care Guide for New Owners

Chinchilla

Exotic Pet

Long Lifespan

Temperature Sensitive

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Chinchilla lanigera (long-tailed) or C. chinchilla (short-tailed)
Lifespan	10 to 20 years with proper care
Adult Size	9 to 15 inches long, 1 to 1.8 lbs
Activity Cycle	Crepuscular to nocturnal (most active at dawn, dusk, and night)
Temperament	Curious, energetic, intelligent; can be shy but bonds well over time
Housing	Tall multi-level cage, minimum 3x2x2 ft; bigger is always better
Temperature	60 to 70 degrees F; above 75 degrees F is dangerous
Humidity	Below 50%; chinchillas do not tolerate humidity well
Diet	Unlimited timothy hay + limited pellets + occasional treats
Dust Baths	Required 2 to 3 times per week; use chinchilla-specific volcanic dust
Lifespan	10 to 20 years; a true long-term commitment
Good with Kids?	Older children with supervision; not recommended for very young children

Meet the Chinchilla

Chinchillas are extraordinary animals. They have the softest fur of any land mammal, personalities that range from bold and outgoing to cautious and sweet, and a lifespan that rivals a cat or dog. A chinchilla is not a short-term pet or a starter animal. They can live 15 to 20 years, which means bringing one home is a commitment measured in decades.

They are also not the right fit for every household. Chinchillas are highly sensitive to heat and humidity, require specific housing and diet, need regular dust baths, and are most active at times when many people are asleep. They are not naturally cuddly animals, though they can become very comfortable with handling over time. For the right owner who does their homework, a chinchilla is an incredibly rewarding companion.

Where They Come From

Chinchillas are native to the Andes Mountains of South America, where they live at high elevations in cold, dry, rocky terrain. Wild chinchillas live in colonies of up to 100 individuals, sleeping in rock crevices during the day and foraging for sparse grasses, herbs, and plant material at dusk and dawn. Their incredible dense fur evolved as insulation against the extreme cold of high-altitude mountain nights.

Two species are kept as pets: *Chinchilla lanigera*, the long-tailed chinchilla, which is the more common of the two, and *Chinchilla chinchilla*, the short-tailed species. Wild chinchillas were hunted nearly to extinction for their fur in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The domestic chinchilla population descends from a small group brought to the United States in the 1920s for fur farming. Over time, they transitioned into the pet trade.

Their Wild Environment Matters

The high Andes are cold, dry, and sparse. This is why heat and humidity are so dangerous for chinchillas, why their diet is based on dry, fibrous plant matter, and why they need dust baths rather than water baths to keep their dense fur clean. Their care requirements are a direct reflection of where they come from.

Housing and Habitat

Chinchillas are active, agile animals that love to climb, jump, and explore. Their housing needs to reflect this. A cage that is tall with multiple platforms and levels is far better than a wide, flat cage with nowhere to go.

Cage Size and Style

The minimum recommended cage size is 3 feet wide by 2 feet deep by 2 feet tall, but taller is always better since chinchillas are natural climbers. Multi-level wire cages with solid resting platforms work best. The bar spacing should be no more than 1 inch to prevent escape and injury. Look for cages specifically marketed for chinchillas or ferrets, as these tend to have the right dimensions and bar spacing.

All resting platforms, ledges, and shelves inside the cage should be made of solid wood or solid metal. Wire mesh platforms cause a condition called bumblefoot over time, where the foot pads break down from constant wire contact. Kiln-dried pine, aspen, and apple wood are all safe choices for platforms and chews. Avoid cedar, plywood, and any wood treated with stains or sealants.

Temperature and Humidity: Critical

Heatstroke Is the Number One Killer of Pet Chinchillas

Chinchillas cannot tolerate temperatures above 75 degrees F, and anything above 80 degrees F can be fatal within a very short time. Their dense fur, which is so beautiful and soft, is also extremely efficient at trapping heat with no way to release it. Chinchillas do not pant, sweat, or cool themselves effectively. Signs of overheating include lying flat, rapid breathing, drooling, and redness around the ears. This is a life-threatening emergency. Move them to a cool area immediately and contact a vet.

Keep chinchillas in a room maintained between 60 and 70 degrees F year-round. Humidity should stay below 50 percent. High humidity causes their fur to mat and clump, creates conditions for fungal skin infections, and makes them uncomfortable and prone to respiratory issues. A thermometer and hygrometer in the room where your chinchilla lives is a worthwhile investment.

Cage Placement

Place the cage away from direct sunlight, heating vents, air conditioning vents, and drafts. A cool, interior room with stable temperature is ideal. Avoid garages, sunrooms, or any space where temperature fluctuates significantly with the seasons.

What to Avoid

Wire mesh floors and platforms: Cause bumblefoot and foot injuries. Cover or replace with solid surfaces.

Plastic inside the cage: Chinchillas chew everything, and ingested plastic causes intestinal blockage. Choose wood, metal, and ceramic accessories only.

Small hamster or rabbit cages: Almost always too small and poorly ventilated for a chinchilla.

Exercise balls: Stressful, dangerous, and do not allow the chinchilla to stop and rest. Use a chinchilla-safe exercise wheel or supervised out-of-cage time instead.

Exercise Wheel

A solid-surface exercise wheel is a great addition to a chinchilla enclosure. The wheel must be large enough, at least 15 inches in diameter, to allow the chinchilla to run without arching its spine. The running surface must be fully solid with no gaps or mesh. Flying Saucer wheels and similarly designed flat-disc style wheels are popular choices that are safe for chinchillas.

Bedding

Because chinchillas are so sensitive to dust and humidity, bedding choice matters more than it might for other animals. The goal is something absorbent, low-dust, and free of anything aromatic or toxic.

Recommended Bedding

Kiln-dried aspen shavings are the most commonly recommended bedding for chinchillas. They are absorbent, low-dust, and do not contain the harmful phenols found in cedar and raw pine.

Paper-based beddings like Carefresh unscented are also a safe choice and are soft to walk on. Freeze any new bedding for 48 hours before use to kill potential mites.

Fleece liners can be used as a cage liner, but because chinchillas chew fabric, watch carefully for any loose threads or ingested pieces. Some chinchillas do fine on fleece; others chew it compulsively. Know your individual chinchilla.

Avoid These Beddings

Cedar shavings: Aromatic oils are toxic to chinchillas and damage the liver and respiratory system.

Raw pine shavings: Contains phenols harmful to small animals.

Scented beddings of any kind: Cause respiratory irritation.

Cotton or fluffy bedding products: Loose fibers cause intestinal blockage if ingested and can wrap around limbs.

Corn cob bedding: Molds quickly, causes impaction if eaten.

Dust Baths

Dust baths are not optional for chinchillas. They are essential to coat health. Chinchillas have incredibly dense fur, around 60 hairs per follicle compared to one hair per follicle in humans. Water causes this fur to clump and mat, which can take hours to dry completely and creates conditions for fungal infections and skin problems. Dust baths are how chinchillas keep their fur clean, fluffy, and healthy.

Offer a dust bath 2 to 3 times per week. Place a few inches of chinchilla-specific volcanic dust (Blue Cloud or Blue Sparkle are trusted brands) in a large container, a wide ceramic bowl, a heavy glass casserole dish, or a dedicated chinchilla bath house. Let the chinchilla roll and flip in the dust for 10 to 15 minutes, then remove the bath to prevent overuse.

Important Dust Bath Notes

Use only chinchilla-specific volcanic dust. Sand, playground sand, and other substrates are not appropriate and can cause respiratory damage.

Do not leave the dust bath in the cage full-time. Excessive bathing dries out the skin and the dust becomes soiled quickly.

Offer baths in the evening when your chinchilla is naturally more active.

Never get a chinchilla wet. If they get wet, dry them thoroughly as quickly as possible with a towel and keep them in a warm, draft-free area. A damp chinchilla is at serious risk of fungal infection and hypothermia.

Diet and Nutrition

Chinchilla digestive systems are designed for a very sparse, high-fiber, low-fat, low-sugar diet. In the wild they survive on dry grasses and plant matter with very little nutritional richness. Feeding rich, sugary, or fatty foods to a chinchilla causes serious and often fatal digestive problems.

Hay: The Foundation

Unlimited timothy hay should be available at all times and make up the vast majority of the diet. Hay provides the fiber that keeps chinchilla digestion moving, wears down constantly growing teeth, and is the closest thing to what they would eat in the wild. Orchard grass is a good variety to rotate in. Alfalfa is too rich for adult chinchillas and should be avoided.

Pellets

Plain chinchilla-specific pellets should be offered in small amounts, about 1 to 2 tablespoons per day. Choose a plain, hay-based pellet with no added seeds, dried fruit, nuts, or colored pieces. Oxbow Essentials Chinchilla Food is a widely trusted option. Avoid muesli-style or mixed grain formulas, as chinchillas selectively eat the tastiest pieces and leave the nutritious ones.

Treats: Rarely and Carefully

Treats should be given very sparingly, no more than a small piece once or twice per week. Even healthy-seeming treats can cause digestive upset in chinchillas because their systems are not adapted to handle sugar or moisture well. Safe treat options include a small piece of dried rosehip, a dried herb like chamomile or dandelion, or a tiny piece of plain shredded wheat cereal.

Occasional Safe Treats

- Small piece of dried rosehip
- Dried herbs: chamomile, dandelion leaf, rose petals
- Plain shredded wheat (no sugar coating)
- A single raisin or cranberry very occasionally

Never Feed These

- Fresh fruit of any kind (too much sugar and moisture)
- Nuts and seeds (too high in fat)
- Vegetables (moisture causes digestive issues)
- Commercial chinchilla treat sticks or yogurt drops
- Anything sweet, sticky, or sugary
- Dairy products of any kind

Water

Fresh water must be available at all times from a sipper bottle. Chinchillas drink relatively small amounts but must always have access. Clean the bottle and change the water daily. Avoid water bowls, as chinchillas will spill them and wet bedding combined with a wet chinchilla is a recipe for problems.

Handling and Interaction

Chinchillas are curious and intelligent but they are also quick, agile, and naturally cautious. They do not typically enjoy being restrained and will let you know when they have had enough. With consistent, patient handling from a young age, most chinchillas become comfortable with and even seek out human interaction.

Building Trust

Start by sitting near the cage and letting your chinchilla come to investigate you on their own terms. Let them sniff your hand through the bars before attempting to handle. When picking up a chinchilla, scoop gently from underneath and support the full body. Never grab by the tail, as the tail can detach (called fur slip) or be injured. Chinchillas can also release a patch of fur as a defense mechanism when grabbed, which is called fur slip as well. It grows back but is a sign of significant stress.

Out-of-cage time in a fully chinchilla-proofed room is one of the best ways to bond with your chinchilla. They are fast and can squeeze into surprisingly small spaces, so ensure the area is completely secure before letting them loose.

Common Health Issues

Chinchillas are generally hardy when their environment and diet are correct, but they are prone to certain conditions that every owner should recognize.

Heatstroke

The leading cause of preventable death in pet chinchillas. Signs include lying flat, rapid or labored breathing, drooling, red ears, and unresponsiveness. Always a medical emergency. Move to a cool area immediately and contact a vet. Prevention is everything: never let the room exceed 70 to 72 degrees F.

GI Stasis and Bloat

Like rabbits and guinea pigs, chinchillas can experience a dangerous slowdown of the digestive system. Signs include not eating, reduced or absent droppings, a bloated or gurgling belly, and lethargy. A vet visit is urgent. High hay intake is the best prevention.

Dental Disease (Malocclusion)

Chinchilla teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. Without adequate hay to wear them down evenly, teeth become overgrown and develop painful spurs that cut into the tongue and cheeks. Signs include drooling, dropping food, weight loss, and a wet chin. Dental problems in chinchillas often require repeated veterinary management under anesthesia.

Fur Slip

A defense mechanism where a chinchilla releases a patch of fur when grabbed. The fur grows back, but it is a sign of serious stress or improper handling. Always handle gently and avoid grabbing or restraining a panicked chinchilla.

Fungal Skin Infections (Ringworm)

Caused by high humidity or a damp coat. Signs include circular patches of hair loss, flaky or crusty skin, and redness. Contagious to humans. Requires veterinary treatment with antifungal medication and a review of environmental humidity.

Respiratory Infections

Signs include nasal discharge, sneezing, labored breathing, and lethargy. Often triggered by drafts, high humidity, or dusty bedding. Requires prompt veterinary treatment.

Constipation

Signs include very small, hard droppings or no droppings at all. Often caused by insufficient hay, dehydration, or too many rich treats. Ensure unlimited hay access and monitor water intake.

Bloat from Incorrect Diet

Feeding fresh vegetables, fruit, or sugary treats can cause rapid fermentation in the gut and dangerous gas buildup. Stick strictly to hay, plain pellets, and very occasional dry treats.

Things Every New Chinchilla Owner Should Know

This is a 15 to 20 year commitment.

Chinchillas routinely live into their late teens with good care. Think carefully about where your life might be in two decades before bringing one home. They are not a starter pet or a short-term animal.

Temperature control is not flexible.

If your home regularly exceeds 72 degrees F in summer, you need a dedicated air-conditioned space for your chinchilla before you bring one home. This is a hard requirement, not a preference.

Dust baths are not a treat, they are a necessity.

Offer them 2 to 3 times a week every week. Skipping dust baths leads to matted, unhealthy fur and skin problems.

Never get your chinchilla wet.

If they get wet accidentally, dry them as quickly and thoroughly as possible with a towel and keep them warm. Their fur takes a very long time to dry and a damp chinchilla is at real risk.

Find an exotic vet before you need one.

Chinchilla-experienced vets are not as common as general small animal vets. Locate one in your area now. Chinchilla health can decline very quickly, and having a vet already identified is critical.

Chewing is a fundamental behavior.

Chinchillas chew constantly. Everything in their enclosure should be safe to chew. Remove all plastic, rubber, and treated wood. Provide plenty of safe chew toys and wooden items to redirect the behavior.

Weigh your chinchilla weekly.

A kitchen scale is one of the most important tools you can own. Weight loss is often the earliest sign of illness in chinchillas, showing up before any other visible symptoms.

Out-of-cage time requires serious chinchilla-proofing.

Chinchillas are fast, curious, and will chew electrical cords, baseboards, furniture, and anything else within reach. Secure or cover everything before letting them roam. They can also squeeze through gaps that seem impossibly small.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you throughout your chinchilla ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.