



# Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia

## CHINCHILLAS

You got a new chinchilla? Congratulations!

Please refer to this handout in helping you setting your new chinchilla up for success as most of the diseases and emergency presentations to the veterinary hospital stem from improper husbandry and could be avoided.



### Did you know?

- Chinchillas are native to the [Andes mountains](#) in [South America](#)
- The chinchilla has the densest fur of all mammals that live on land
- In nature, chinchillas live in social groups that resemble colonies, but are properly called [herds](#). Herd sizes can range from 14 members up to 100, this is both for social interaction as well as protection from predators.
- They can breed any time of the year. Their gestation period is 111 days, longer than most rodents.
  - Due to this long pregnancy, chinchillas are born fully furred and with eyes open. Litters are usually small in number, predominantly two

### DIET:

- The wild chinchilla lives on a diet of grasses and leaves and has a specialized gut which is adapted for this. The large intestine contains bacteria which break down the grass to make it digestible.
- The adult chinchilla needs a high fiber, restricted carbohydrate, restricted protein and virtually no fat diet to stay healthy.
- The most important thing in a chinchilla's diet is [Timothy hay](#). Your chinchilla must have 24 hour access to loose Timothy hay. Check that the hay is good quality; it should have a fresh sweet smell, not dusty or moldy.
- Young chinchillas (less than 6 months of age) can also have alfalfa hay in addition to Timothy hay. You can also give your chinchilla a few hay cubes, but this does NOT replace the loose hay.
- Chinchillas **do not** require pellets in their diet. Pellets have too many calories and not enough fiber. Additionally, they are very bad for their teeth. If you are going to give pellets, do not give more than one spoonful twice daily.
- Fresh vegetables: chinchillas **do not** require fresh veggies for their wellbeing
- Treats: As a treat, you can offer your chinchilla a small piece (no larger than 1 cm) of a carrot or an apple. They should not receive more than one treat per week.
- Inappropriate foods: You should **NEVER** offer your chinchilla other treats such as seeds or sugary snacks. This is not appropriate and can upset their stomach.

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- Chinchilla have a great sweet tooth and would love to eat sweet snack if provided but unfortunately this will lead to dental disease and obesity
- Remember that any diet changes **MUST** be made slowly. If it is too fast, this can upset the gut and cause bacterial imbalances and that can kill your chinchilla. It may take up to 1 week to introduce a new hay or brand of pellets.

### **WATER**

- 24 hour access is essential.
- Most chinchillas will prefer drinking from a bottle but you could also offer a heavy bowl.
- The bowl or bottle should be scrubbed out with soap every other day to prevent mold and bacterial growth.

### **DUST BATH**

- A fresh dust bath should be offered every few days.
- Do **NOT** keep the dust bath in the cage with the chinchilla as it can lead to conjunctivitis

### **ENCLOSURE:**

- A large cage should be used, with vertical space for jumping. The floors must be solid, as chinchillas can break their leg if it gets trapped between bars or grates.
- Keep the cage clean and dry. The floor of the cage can be lined with shredded paper towels or newspaper or even fleece
  - We do **NOT** recommend the use of wooden shavings (chips) as this can cause respiratory tract irritation.
- Exercise is very important for chinchillas. You can put a running wheel in the cage.
- Make sure the wheel is made of solid plastic - do not use metal wheels as their feet and/or legs can become trapped and broken.

### **ENVIRONMENT:**

- Chinchillas originally come from the top of the Andes Mountains, where it is cold, dry and quiet. Therefore, it is very important to keep them cool and dry especially in the summer.
- Never leave them in the sun. During the summer, they should always be kept in an air conditioned room that is no warmer than 70F
- Chinchillas are nervous animals and suffer easily from stress. Keep them quiet; don't keep them next to the TV or stereo.
- Chinchillas are nocturnal (sleep during the day and are awake at night), so it is important for them to be in a quiet, cool place during the day so that they can get appropriate sleep.
- Handle them gently. Be very careful with their fragile tails and fragile fur - do not grab them by the tail as this may cause the tail to break or the fur and skin to fall off.

### **HEALTH**

- Check the teeth and the bottoms of the feet regularly.

- Contact your veterinarian if you notice that the feet are red, swollen, wet or painful. Contact your veterinarian if you notice that the teeth are crooked, too long, broken or discolored.
- Additionally, contact your veterinarian if you notice that your chinchilla is drooling, has wetness around the mouth or front legs or is dropping food from its mouth.
- It is very important that chinchillas are always eating and always defecating. The feces should be the same amount, color and size (about 1/3 inch) every day. It is an emergency if your chinchilla stops eating, stops defecating, produces small feces or develops diarrhea. Please contact your veterinarian immediately.
- Chinchillas are very good at hiding signs of being sick. Therefore take them to the vet quickly if your chinchilla is acting abnormally at all - more sleepy, has droopy eyes, has watery eyes or seems to be too quiet. They can become very sick very quickly so be vigilant!

**Reasons to bring your chinchilla to a veterinarian:**

Difficulty or abnormal breathing sound and pattern

Lethargy and exercise intolerance

Discharge from the nose or eyes

Masses/lumps

Changes in fecal production and fecal consistency

Drooling

Traumatic injuries

Loss of balance

Seizure activity

Inappetance/weight loss or weight gain

