

# Chinchilla Care Booklet



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# HOUSING

## Cages

Chinchillas need to be housed in a wire cage with openings no larger than 1 inch x 2 inches. If you are getting a young chinchilla or are planning to have babies in the future the openings should be 1/2" x 1". They love to chew and will escape from a cage made with a plastic bottom. Aquariums do not have enough ventilation and a chinchilla will overheat in one. If you use a wire floor cage be sure the wire opening are no larger than 1/2" x 1/2". You should add a wooden box or shelf to the cage so that the chinchilla won't have to stand on wire all the time. Cages with solid bottoms are a good choice.

Chinchillas tend to make a bigger mess using this type of cage because they can push shavings out at night while they are playing, but I like this type better. There is no chance of foot injury from slipping through the wire floor and the shavings are warmer and eliminate drafts. This type cage is especially good for breeding since babies can die quickly from a chill when they are first born.

Make sure that the cage you choose will give your chinchilla plenty of room to move around. Chinchillas need to be able to climb, run around, and play. They have a lot of energy, and need exercise. If your cage is too small and your chinchilla can't run around outside the cage regularly he will become very unhappy. We recommend 24"x24" as a good starting size with enough height to include a shelf or two. However with chinchillas, bigger is always better!

Make sure there are no toxic paints or plastics on or near your cage. A chinchilla will chew on anything! If you only have one chinchilla, you should only have to change the shavings once a week. (Remember NO Cedar shaving!! Cedar will kill a chinchilla.) Most chinchillas will find one spot in their cage to urinate. Once you discover where it is, you can clean that area more often if you like. Remember a chinchilla is a rodent so it will leave droppings everywhere. You can not train a chinchilla not to leave droppings wherever it goes. You should remove your chin every few months and disinfect the cage.

### **Important points to keep in mind :**

- No Cardboard with lots of ink
- No Cedar Shavings!!
- No wire spacing big enough that the chinchilla's feet can slip through.

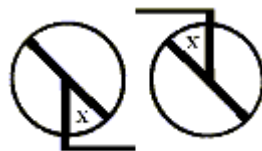
## Cage equipment

Your chinchilla will need a food tray for his pellets. The best choice would be one that hangs on the side of the cage. If you choose to use a dish instead your chinchilla will use it for a bathroom. The food will also be spilled frequently. A hay manger is also a good idea to keep the hay off the of the cage floor.

Glass bottles are best since chinchillas will chew a hole threw plastic ones. If you do use a plastic bottle you can protect it by wrapping it with small mesh wire. We have also found that cutting the bottom and a small portion of the top off of a 1 liter soda bottle will allow you to slip it around the real water bottle to keep your chinchilla from chewing it. Water bottles should be washed with soap and water every time you refill them to avoid bacteria problems. Be sure to rinse the bottle out thoroughly.

Chinchillas have teeth that are constantly growing, so they need to have things to chew on. Untreated pine wood, pumice stones, and apple tree branches can be used as chew toys. Another thing chinchillas love is a hiding place. This can be a pine box, a large piece of PVC, or a large coffee can flattened on one side so it won't roll. You must be sure that nothing is made of cedar. Shelves and solid chinchilla wheels can be added to give your new pet things to play on. If you have a wire shelf in the cage, make sure the grating is 1/2" x 1/2" or smaller so that feet can't slip through. I prefer wooden shelves made of untreated pine because they can be used as a chew toy as well, however you will have to change them from time to time.

Chinchilla wheels attached to the side of the cage with one side completely open are the safest. If you are not able to purchase this type of wheel you may choose to use the common metal wheels found in most pet and super stores. This type of wheel has cross bars on each side of the wheel as well as a stand that attaches to the center. When the wheel is spinning these two bars cross one another causing a scissor effect. This is very dangerous for a chinchilla jumping in and out of the wheel. I suggest hanging the wheel from the Top of the cage so that the scissor effect will be at the top of the wheel and the bottom of the wheel (where the chin will be entering and exiting) will be clear.



**Wrong    Correct**

## Cage Location

Once you have chosen a cage you need to find the best place to put it. You need to find a spot that will not have a draft in the winter and will stay cool during the summer. Keep the cage out of direct sunlight. Because of their thick fur, chinchillas can get overheated very easily, which can be deadly! Make sure there are no electrical wires near the cage. You may also want to keep the cage away from drapes. It is surprising how far out of the cage a chinchilla can reach, and if he can reach it he will probably chew it. Lead paint will kill a chinchilla. If you have lead based paint in your home, keep your chin far away from it.

## Room temperature and Heat

The humidity in a room plays a huge part in what temperatures a chinchilla will be the most comfortable. Areas with higher humidity will need to keep the chinchilla room cooler than areas of low humidity. A good rule of thumb is to add the humidity and the temperature together. The sum of these two numbers should never be greater than 150. If you don't know the humidity in your area it's best to keep the room about 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

During the warmer months there are a few things you can do to help your chinchilla stay cool. First, move the cage to the coolest room in the house. If you are able to place a few tin/metal baking pans in the freezer to make them cold you can then alternate these in the cage for your chinchilla to lie on. A small bowl of ice can also be placed in the cage for the chinchilla to cuddle up by. Just be sure the bowl isn't deep enough for babies to fall in. Don't blow a fan directly at the cage. It won't do much for cooling your chinchilla off since he doesn't sweat like humans. Also, the fan could frighten your chinchilla causing him to begin fur biting. (Chinchillas cool down using the blood flow to their big ears. The outside air cools the blood before it is returned to the rest of the body. You can tell a chinchilla is hot when its ears begin to turn more pinkish red and the veins are more evident. This is easier to see on pink eared chinchillas.)

# CARE

## Bathing & Grooming

Chinchillas have very dense fur with a lot of lanolin. They require a special dust bath a few times a week. Use a dish that is large enough for your chinchilla to roll in. Pour about an inch of dust in the dish and place it inside the cage. Your chinchilla will jump in and have a wonderful time. Only leave the dust in the cage for about 15 minutes. Always use chinchilla dust. Never put your chin in real sand. The dust can be reused for about a week or until it begins to look clumpy. Scoop out all of the pellets before you store it away for the next use. If your chinchilla urinates in the dust you can not reuse it. If you are breeding your chinchillas, wait 10 days after a birth to give mother and babies a bath. When mom gets hers let the babies bathe too. If you have more than one cage of chinchillas, each should have their own container. Using the same dust for multiple cages is a good way to pass on a sickness. Do not wash a chinchilla with water. If you do happen to get your chin wet roll him up in a towel immediately and keep him warm.

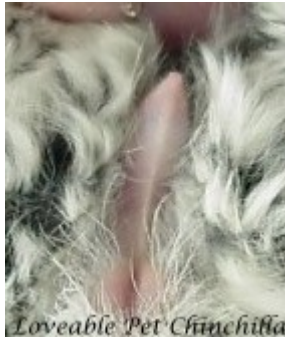
## Feeding

A chinchilla's main diet is made up of Chinchilla pellets. We recommend Mazuri 5M01 Chinchilla Food. Calf Manna is a great source of Calcium for your chinchilla. We suggest 4 parts Mazuri to 1 part Calf Manna. You can find both products at [www.LoneStarChinchilla.com](http://www.LoneStarChinchilla.com). Another good choice for chinchilla pellets is Manna Pro Classic Show Rabbit Pellets. This has almost the same make up as the Mazuri. Most feed stores can order this for you. Your local Wal-Mart store may be able to order it as well. Stay away from the food that contains fruit. Do not give your chinchilla gerbil or other rodent food as a main diet. Find one kind of pellet and stick to it. Chinchillas have very delicate digestive systems so changing their diet too drastically can cause sickness and even death. We keep our chinchilla feed dishes full. There is no need to measure their feed since they will only eat when they get hungry. However, if you have a chinchilla that becomes fat or has soft, sticky pellets you will need to cut back on the feed. On average 1 lb. of pellets should last about 20 days when feeding a single chinchilla.

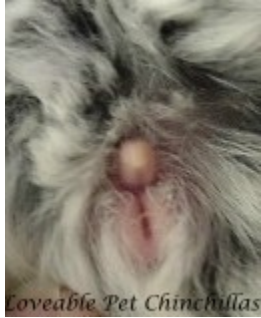
Give your chinchilla unlimited access to timothy or alfalfa hay. We recommend a mixture of the two since each has different nutritional values. Both can be bought in almost any pet store either as loose hay in a bag or as pressed cubes of hay. Either one is fine however some chinchillas won't eat the cubes. This is given ALONG with the pellets. Chinchillas love to get treats; however, you can only give a small amount a day. An adult chin may have 1-2 raisins a day, or a small wedge of apple. If your chinchilla becomes fat or develops diarrhea (soft, sticky pellets) you need to cut back on the treats. For diarrhea you may need to stop treats all together for awhile.

## HOW TO SEX YOUR CHINCHILLA

The sex of a chinchilla can be determined by the size of the space between the anus and the genitals. You can tell the sex of a chinchilla from the moment it is born. These pictures were taken when the chinchillas were about 6 weeks old.



This is a male chinchilla.  
You can see that if you lift the penis there is an obvious space between it and the anus.



This is a female chinchilla.  
You can see that the two are side by side with no space between.

# INTERACTION

## One Chin or Two?

How much time you have should be a big factor in deciding how many chinchillas to get. If you are able to spend some quality time with your chin each night, than a single chinchilla will do just fine. If you travel a lot or are very busy it may be better for you to get two. Chinchillas do very well in pairs. They can handle stress better together. Two males can be successfully housed together if they are introduced slowly. Females can also be housed together but sometimes it is a bit harder if they are not litter mates. I have found that in pairs, the outgoing one tends to help tame the shy one. If you already have a friendly chinchilla you won't have to worry about it bonding to a new chin and no longer accepting you.

## Introducing the New Chinchilla

Usually a new chinchilla placed into the cage with your other one without a proper introduction period will not get accepted. In fact, chinchillas can fight to the death if they are put together too fast. When you get a new chin it is best to introduce him slowly over time. Some matches take a bit longer than others but with a bit of patience and a few techniques, pairing them up is possible. These techniques should be used for same sex pairs as well as for male/female pairs. Many pairs will go together only using the first step, but sometimes all of them will be needed:

1. Place their cages side by side for a week so they can meet through the cage bars. Once they seem OK with one another place them in the same cage.  
\*\*Make sure you do this on a day when you can be there for a long while to watch for fighting. If they fight you will have to separate them and try again later. If you are introducing a male to a female be sure to place the female into the male's cage NOT the other way around.
2. If the above doesn't work, place the chinchillas in each other's cage for about half an hour. Make sure you leave the original bedding and houses, etc. This way they can get used to each other's scent.
3. At the end of one of the above methods place the two chinchillas in a brand new cage with new bedding that doesn't have the smell of either animal. Neither one will have the "home turf" advantage.

## How to Pick Up or Catch a Chinchilla

It is best to leave your chinchilla inside his cage until you have gained his trust (see below). Once you have become friends it should be easy to get him to walk out onto your arm and then you can cuddle him from there and take him where you need to go.

If your chinchilla is not to this point and you must get him out of his cage, place both hands inside. With one hand on the right side and one hand on the left, try to sweep your chinchilla towards your body and cuddle him close to you. This is the least stressful way to catch him.

If your chinchilla is loose in the house it is best to corner him in a small space. Get down on your knees and then scoop him up just as you would in his cage.

If your chinchilla has hidden himself under or behind furniture try shaking his dust bath around and then placing it on the floor. Once he has jumped in you can place them both inside the cage.

This is a good time to talk about training your chinchilla. It is a good idea to rattle the raisin box before you give your chinchilla a treat, or say a certain word before you give the dust bath. Once your chinchilla has learned to associate a sound with its favorite treat or bath it can be very helpful in luring him out from behind the tv or under the couch.

### Things to Remember:

- Never grab a chinchilla by the tip of his tail. If you must hold him still (i.e. for a health check) you can hold his tail right at the base where his tail meets his body. Make sure he is standing on his feet.
- Never try to catch a chinchilla by grabbing at him. You will end up with a hand full of fur and your chinchilla will still get away. (However if this happens don't worry. It didn't hurt him and the hair will grow back.)

# How to Make Friends with Your Chinchilla

When you first bring your new friend home give him some space to get used to the new environment. Expect your chinchilla to be a little afraid. Remember that he has traveled in a strange car, entered a new house, and a new cage. Even the tamest chinchilla can be withdrawn and frightened at first. Here is what I suggest for getting a new chinchilla to be your friend. This is by no means the only way to make friends with your new chinchilla. This is what I have found works best for me.

Step #1-Get him to show interest in you.

The first step in making friends with your new chinchilla is to let it know that you are no threat. Open the cage door and place your hand just inside of the cage. If your chinchilla is afraid it will usually run and hide in the back corner of the cage. If it hides inside a box and will not come out then slowly remove the box so that your chin will have to look at you. Now just sit tight. If you are lucky enough to have a very curious chin then it will slowly start creeping up to you. If after awhile it has no interest in you at all you will have to try the raisin.

Baiting with A Raisin

**(Note: A chinchilla should only have one or two raisins a day)**

If your chinchilla has never had a raisin then you must first teach it what one is. Try to feed your chinchilla through the bars of the cage. If it won't take it at first then you may have to place it inside the cage and give your chinchilla some room. Once he learns how great they are he will soon begin taking them from your hand through the bars. Once he has mastered bar feeding it is time to open the door. With any luck your chin will take the raisin from your open palm. This is what you want to achieve. You want your chinchilla to be comfortable with your hands and arms.

## Step #2-Building Trust

Once your chinchilla decides that you are interesting he will begin to come forward. If he startles and runs to the back again, don't move. Your chinchilla will soon learn that you are not going to chase it. Then the fun begins. He will creep forward and run to the back. Take a few steps closer and once again take off. Finally he will sniff your hand. He may even give you a little taste. If he begins to linger in the rear of the cage or becomes agitated end the "lesson" there and try again later. Once he is comfortable standing or holding on to your hand you have gained some trust.

## Step #3 Petting

Almost all of my chinchillas love to be scratched behind the ears, under the chin, and just under their front legs on their bellies. The trick is to get them to let you do it. Once they have become very comfortable with your presence it is time to begin petting. I place my hand just inside the cage with index finger ready. It is easier to start on top of the head and work your way behind the ear. (Their whiskers are ticklish) The way I see it is if they come to me they are fair game, but I respect their space. When they come to my hand I try to rub their head. The less you move your hand the better. At first he will take off to the back of the cage. Soon he comes right back and you do it again. If he gets upset and won't come back to your hand wait a few days before you try to rub him again. The idea is to gain trust, not loose it. I do have a few chins that are just too ticklish. The moment you touch them they shake and rub their heads. Those may not ever become pettable, but they still love to climb on you! Those chins that learn to love petting will close their eyes, lift their legs, and get so relaxed that they practically fall over!

\*\*\*All chinchillas are different. Some may follow this example perfectly and others will be painfully slow. Some may love petting from the start. I wrote this to give some ideas as to how gaining trust might be done. What works for me may not work for you. When it comes to you and your animal, you will have to find what is right for you. As with any animal, patience and love are always the best tools!

# BREEDING BASICS

## Breeding Age

Chinchillas are capable of breeding as early as 3 months of age, but females should NOT be bred until they are at least 8 months old. If a chinchilla is bred too early she may not be large enough to safely deliver the babies. For this reason, keep females away from males until they are the correct breeding age. Sons should be removed their Mothers by 3 months of age to prevent inbreeding.

## Pregnancy and Delivery

Females are pregnant for about 111 days and can have anywhere from 1-6 babies (called kits). It is very hard to tell if a female is pregnant until she is within a week or two of delivering. You may notice that she is getting fatter, and if you weigh her regularly you will notice a weight gain. During the last weeks of pregnancy, her nipples will begin to get very long to allow the new babies get to find them in all that fur. This is a sure sign that delivery isn't far away.

To prepare for the birth, make sure the cage is out of drafts and give Mom a box to have her babies in. (Pine wood, large coffee can, etc.) If you have a wire bottom cage it may be a good idea to cover the cage floor with newspaper so the babies won't be chilled. Mom can birth all by herself. Chances are you won't even know when she is in labor. If you do happen to catch the miracle don't interfere. Stay back from the cage so she will feel comfortable.

Mother will bend down and pull the babies out with her teeth. Siblings can be born as much as 45 minutes apart or more. It is possible that mom could accidentally bite off a toe, a piece of ear, and in a breech birth part of the tail. Don't get upset about it, it's more common than you might think. Just put pressure on the wound if it is bleeding badly, and then give the baby back to Mom. Keep an eye on the area for infection.

# NEW BABIES ~NOW WHAT??

## What about Dad?

This calls for a lot of thought on your part. Usually the dad will help Mom care for the babies and keep them warm while she delivers the rest. However, there are some things to consider. Mom will go back into heat right away after the delivery. In fact, some males will try to mate while Mom is in labor. These males will have to be removed! If you choose to leave your family together, you must place a small can, box, or bottle in the cage just large enough for the babies to fit in. If the babies don't have a place to hide they will get smashed during the mating. It is very likely that a baby will be killed if it is not protected during mating. If the father is left in the cage you can count on Mom getting pregnant while she is nursing the little ones. This can put a lot of strain on her. Make sure you watch her teeth for signs of whitening. If they appear to be losing their yellow-orange color give her 1/4 of a TUMS with calcium each day. One last thing to consider is that there is a chance the male may go after a female baby if the mother refuses to let him mate her. There have been cases of female kits being killed due to this problem.

For these reasons, I always recommend removing the male when the mother delivers and leaving them apart until the mother is through nursing (no sooner than 7-8 weeks). When you return Dad you will have to treat it just like introducing a brand new chinchilla. (see that topic above) All female babies will then need to be removed. All male babies should leave Mom by 3 months of age to prevent them from trying to breed back to her.

## Dust Bath

Mom shouldn't have a dust bath for 10 days after deliver. This is to give her body time to heal from the delivery. It also gives the new babies time to develop. A newborn shouldn't be breathing in all of the dust and they may not have enough coordination to keep the dust out of their eyes. After the 10 day wait let babies and Mom take the bath together. She will show them how it is done.

## Wheels

Remove any wheels from the cage when there are babies. They are just too dangerous for the little ones. Standing wheels with spokes shouldn't be put back into a cage with babies. Open sided wheels that attach to the side of the cage can be returned when the babies are between one and two months old.

## Handling

By all means handle those babies! Who could resist? Wait at least a day or two after birth to give Mom a chance to get used to parenting. Then only hold them for a short time at first. Mom knows her babies, so don't be afraid to hug them, kiss them, and cuddle them up. She will happily accept them when you put them back in the cage.

## Babies Are Crying~Is Mom Hurting Them?

Like all babies, these little guys will fuss when its time for grooming. Don't be concerned to see Mom nibbling on their faces and bottoms, usually with babies fussing and crying.

# WHEN CHINCHILLAS GET SICK

## Diarrhea:

If your chinchilla has soft pellets that are flattening out when stepped on or are sticking to objects in the cage he has diarrhea. There are two common problems which usually cause this.

\*\*1st- look at his amount of treats. Are you giving him raisins or other fruit? If so, stop them for a few days until the pellets are normal then slowly start back again giving him less. Make sure he has extra hay and a few less chinchilla pellets while he is overcoming his diarrhea. Burnt toast is a good cure for tummy upset. The charcoal in the blackened parts should settle his tummy within 24 hours if it's a diet problem.

\*\*Another common cause is a dirty water bottle. Water bottles should be cleaned on a regular basis to control bacteria. If a bacterium does grow in the bottle your chinchilla will get diarrhea. A good cleaning should solve the problem. Once again extra hay and less chinchilla pellets for a few days should help. If you use Clorox to clean your bottles, be sure to rinse very well. Clorox in the water can affect your chinchilla's fur color.

\*\*If neither one of these solves the problem, then your chinchilla needs a trip to the vet. Have them do a "wet slide" to check for Giardia.

## Fur Biting

Fur biting occurs when a chinchilla is nervous or upset. You will notice parts of the fur are shorter than the rest. In very bad cases you will find small bald spots. (If you see scaly skin read about fungus below) Try to think about what has changed in your chinchilla's daily life. (i.e. a new cage, a new pet, a move to a new room in your house, a fan blowing on him) Once you have figured out the problem and taken away the stress, the fur biting should stop and the hair will grow back in. Make sure he has a box of some sort to go into to hide and feel safe. You can give your chinchilla treats of papaya to stop fur balls from forming in his stomach. Many people believe that fur biting can be caused by a genetic nervous disorder. If your chinchilla has been biting from an early age or can not be cured by changing something in his environment its best not to breed the chinchilla.

## Fungus

Sometime a chinchilla can get fungus. You will notice one or more bald spots and the skin underneath will look a bit scaly. To treat this buy Desenex or Tinactin, types of athletes foot powder, which you can find at just about any store. This can be added to the dust bath (1 heaping teaspoon full to 1 ½ -2 cups of dust.) The fungus should clear right up in a week or so. Once it is better be sure to disinfect both the dust bath container and the cage.

Fungus is contagious so wash your hands and arms after touching your chinchilla, also keep him away from any other chinchillas that don't already have it.

\*\*\*If it has not begun to improve in a week, you need to see a vet.

## Eye Problems

Chinchillas often have minor eye irritations from dust or shavings. A vet visit is always a good idea to determine whether or not the eye has been scratched or damaged in any way. Minor eye irritations can usually be cured with tea. Make a cup of warm tea following the directions on the box. (Be sure its not hot enough to burn) Dip a cotton ball in the tea and hold it over the eye for a few minutes. You should see an improvement by the next morning.

## Respiratory Infection

If you notice your chinchilla is coughing and/or has a runny/crusty nose, a trip to the vet is a must ASAP. It could be a respiratory infection. If it is caught fast enough your chinchilla will need some antibiotics and will recover just fine. However, once a chinchilla gets too sick it can be very hard to get them well and death will occur.

If your chinchilla is taking oral antibiotics give yogurt with live cultures as well. The yogurt should be given between doses, not at the same time as the medication. This will keep up your chinchilla's strength and replace any natural bacteria that the medicine has taken away.

## Drooling

If you notice that your chinchilla is constantly wet under the chin and begins to smell a bit sour it may have a problem with its teeth. You will need to see a vet. You can check your chinchilla's teeth by looking at the 4 front ones to be sure that they meet in a straight line in the front and are not broken or split. On rare occasions a chinchilla can crack or split a tooth and it will need to be clipped or filed. If the teeth are meeting at an angle your chinchilla may have problems with its back teeth. Tooth problems are best handled by an experienced vet.

## White Teeth

All chinchillas are born with white teeth. As they grow, their teeth turn a nice yellowish-orange. If your ADULT chinchilla begins to develop whiter teeth it needs calcium. This is usually only a problem in pregnant or nursing mothers. Calf Manna is a great source of Calcium and can be mixed with her regular pellets. We give all of our chinchillas a mix of 4 parts Chin Pellets to 1 part Calf Manna. If you don't have Calf Manna you can give her 1/4 of a TUMS with calcium antacid tablet a day.