

*With its exceptionally soft fur, big eyes, and curious ears, a chinchilla is an endearing rodent originating from the high Andes of South America. They have been trapped to near extinction in the wild and were first introduced to Europe for fur farming and have recently become a pet in some households. They can make a wonderful pet, once you realise that they are an exotic animal with a **very long life-span and very specific requirements.***

The minimum standard for the welfare of any animal is summarized by

THE FIVE FREEDOMS

- 1. Freedom from hunger and thirst**
- 2. Freedom from discomfort**
- 3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease**
- 4. Freedom to express natural behaviour**
- 5. Freedom from fear and distress**

Accordingly your chinchilla will need:

- **Appropriate food and clean water**
- **Comfortable shelter**
- **Access to a dust bath**
- **Companionship**
- **Space and regular exercise**
- **Toys for play**
- **Appropriate veterinary care**

Where do you get a chinchilla from?

A reputable breeder or rescue centre.

How to choose a healthy chinchilla

Look for a healthy looking chinchilla with bright eyes and that appears alert. A healthy chinchilla will move quickly when startled and should not

appear too thin or too heavy. Chinchillas are normally silent unless alarmed or distressed.

Male or female?

Chinchillas have very strong individual personalities. As a broad generalisation, male chinchillas tend to be slightly smaller and slightly more placid. Females tend to be larger and more territorial. Females may also squirt urine when distressed. While males can be housed together, a female is likely to display aggression towards another strange female. Both sexes will care for the young, which are usually born fully furred, singly or as twins, however the female will be ready to mate again within 24 hours of giving birth. Some fur colour genes are lethal if bred together.

Housing

Chinchillas need to be kept indoors, away from draughts and dampness. The cage should be placed in an area where temperature is relatively constant and away from direct sunlight, as they cannot tolerate high temperatures, high humidity, or getting wet. The cage should be out of reach of other pets, especially cats. The cage should have plenty of room, ideally with multiple levels. Cage furnishing includes a nest box, a water bottle, a dust bath, fruit tree branches for climbing, and some chew toys. Chinchillas do enjoy a supervised run around outside the cage, but be warned, they are very destructive, chewing anything they can get their teeth into. Furniture, skirting boards cables and books are all targets for their gnawing.

Dust Baths

Dust baths are fundamental in a chinchilla's cage, as chinchillas enjoy daily baths to remove surplus oil, grease and any dampness and to keep their

fur in good condition. The contents of the dust bath should be fine sand sized fuller's earth (usually sepiolite), which is available in pet shops, ordinary beach or builder's sand is **not** suitable. You can allow your chinchilla permanent access to a dust bath by leaving it in the cage and cleaning it regularly, or introduce the bath every day for half to one hour.

Handling

Chinchillas have very individual characters. Most do not like to be held or handled too much, they prefer to explore rather than to be held or restrained. They will explore fingers with their teeth and give a gentle nip if upset, but actual hard bites are the exception and may indicate that the animal is experiencing pain.

Being able to handle your chinchilla and interact with it will make your relationship extra rewarding. Never pick your chinchilla up by the tail. Books which suggest holding by the tail or ears are incorrect, those methods were used by fur farms to avoid disturbing the fur- not for the benefit of the animal.

Feeding/ Nutrition

Chinchillas are naturally adapted to a vegetarian diet that is high in fibre and low in protein. The basic diet consists of a small amount of chinchilla pellets and free access to good quality hay. Be sure that the food stays fresh and clean at all times. Chinchillas can be offered treats of fresh fruits and vegetables occasionally. Most chinchillas love a raisin or an apple slice as a treat, but more than two treats a day can cause stomach upsets and diarrhoea. Over the longer term, too much rich food can result in liver damage and a shortened life. Water should be offered in a bottle placed on the outside of the

cage, and this should be changed every day to prevent harmful bacterial growth.

Healthcare

Chinchillas can **live for 20 years or more**, so be prepared, they are a longer-term commitment than having children! They tend to be very healthy animals, and do not need any vaccinations. If provided with a clean cage, a well-balanced diet and a stress-free environment with lots of love and care, you will have a healthy chinchilla. You must watch out for signs of unusual tiredness, refusal of food, soft droppings, loss of weight and poor condition of the fur as these are signs of poor health. Seek veterinary care if in any doubt of a problem.

Toys

Chinchillas are very intelligent, curious creatures and enjoy toys in the cage. They are rodents, so it is also important to have some wood in the cage which they can use to keep their teeth at the correct length. Fresh elm, hazel and fruit tree twigs are great favourites.

Some types of wood are **harmful** and should be avoided; these include Yew, elder, cypress (including leylandii), and any woods treated with preservatives or paints. Most older houses and some recently imported ornaments and toys will contain poisonous lead paint.

Costs and time

There are some costs associated with a cage, food and bedding. Chinchillas are crepuscular - which means that they are awake and active at dawn and dusk - so they need peace and quiet during the day to be able to rest and care, time and attention in the evenings and at night. This may be inconvenient for some people.

Children and chinchillas

Chinchillas are very fragile little animals so extreme care has to be taken when handling them. Small children should NEVER handle or hold them as this can severely damage the chinchilla. They do not like being handled like a cat or a dog and most do not like to be picked up so they are not ideal to have around children.

Chinchillas and other animals

Chinchillas are small and fragile, they are also very susceptible to stress, for example a cat near to the cage can cause the chinchilla to become very agitated, and give repeated ascending alarm calls. Repeated stress or long term stress can be fatal to any small animal.

Individual chinchillas may learn to accept contact with a mature dog, or an old and non predatory cat, although close human supervision is essential.

Chinchillas can be very hostile towards other small animals, such as guinea pigs and rabbits. In turn, rabbits may be dangerously aggressive towards the chinchilla. Chinchillas may also be aggressive, possibly even predatory towards small birds.

Sources of information

Get several books and be very sceptical. Much information has come un-challenged from fur farm practice and has nothing at all to do with the welfare of the animal (e.g. catching by tail or ears, housing on wire floors), other information reflects individual writers' personal neuroses (e.g. clipping new born babies' teeth). If in doubt, do not delay in asking a small animal vet.

simply because we care
**Kilkenny
spca**



Caring for your

CHINCHILLA

Contact details for the Kilkenny SPCA
Tel.: 056 7771635
Email: info@kilkennyspca.ie
Visit our website: www.kilkennyspca.ie