

SMALL MAMMAL HEALTH SERIES

By Susan Brown, DVM

Chinchillas

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 who 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 hyperactive (both the child and the pet). 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.

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. A pelleted formulation should constitute the majority of the animal's diet.

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 other than its fur. Any hay fed should be free from mold and vermin contamination.

Dried fruit and nuts are excellent treats for the pet chinchilla. Raisins tend to be a favorite treat among these animals. Fresh carrots and green vegetables can also be provided but in moderation. Remember, these supplements to the diet should constitute less than 10% of the food intake.

Chinchillas can drink water from valve waterers or sipper-type bottles. Very careful sanitation of the water supply is necessary, since contaminated water may be a contributing factor in disease outbreaks.

Infectious Diseases

Enteritis (Intestinal Infection)

One of the most common disease conditions of chinchillas is enteritis, which is an infection of the digestive tract. In many cases, the exact cause may not be determined. Bacterial, viral and protozoal agents have all been associated with the syndrome. A few specific agents include *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Salmonella typhimurium*, *E. coli* and *Giardia*. Poor husbandry and management is often associated with an outbreak. Clinical signs are variable, ranging from depression to death. The chinchilla often exhibits diarrhea, but not consistently. Other signs of illness include loss of appetite, partial paralysis, and a painful abdomen. Examination of the feces through fecal flotations, direct smears, and cultures may reveal the causative agent. Veterinary care and treatment must be sought at the first sign of illness. Treatment of enteritis involves appropriate antibiotic therapy and supportive care. This disease is often fatal despite aggressive therapy due to the severity of the illness.

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 with fur ranchers due to the damage to the chinchilla's hair coat. Treatment involves the use of griseofulvin as prescribed by your veterinarian.

Non-Infectious Diseases

Malocclusion / Slobbers

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). Mineral imbalances as well as poor dental alignment lead to overgrown and maloccluded 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.

Fur Slip

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

Barbering / Fur Chewing

Barbering is the condition where a chinchilla chews on its own or another's fur resulting in a rough, moth-eaten appearing coat. Some of the underlying causes of this behavior include boredom, dirty fur, dietary imbalances and hereditary factors. This condition is a serious problem in the pelt industry. Providing the animals with chew toys as well as selective breeding often aid in decreasing the incidence within a colony.

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.

Facts

Average Life Span: 8 - 10 years up to 18 yrs

Environmental Temperature Range: 60 - 75 F

Body Temperature: 97 - 100 F

Gestation: 111 days

Litter size: 1 - 5 (range), with an average of 2

Weaning Age: 6 - 8 weeks

Handling

Chinchillas are not very difficult to handle and rarely bite. 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 grasp the base of the tail (close to the body) with one hand, while supporting the body on your opposite forearm and against your body. Chinchillas can also be held around the thorax as done with other rodents. Although they rarely bite, they still are capable, if agitated enough. In addition, and more likely, 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 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. Glass aquariums or plastic containers can be used, but with caution due to their poor ventilation. If these containers are used, watch for the development of scruffy fur as an indication of impending problems. 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 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 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 tend not to get along well when housed together, with the female being the more aggressive gender. Breeders and petters commonly set up polygamous colonies with one male having access to five or so females maintained in separate cages. The male has a tunnel along the back of the females cages which enables him to enter any cage at will. The females cannot pass through the tunnel because they are fitted with light-weight collars that are just a little wider than the cage opening.

Reproduction

Chinchillas will breed throughout the year, with the main breeding season being between November and May. Estrous cycles vary from 30 to 50 days. Many female chinchillas have irregular cycles.

The female chinchilla can be quite aggressive towards the male. For this reason, males are given the opportunity to escape from the female's cage. This is accomplished by placing a collar around the female's neck and having a small exit hole that the male can climb through, but the female wearing a collar cannot. Many breeders set up several female chinchilla cages in a row with a pathway located in back allowing free access to several females by the single male (see the CHINCHILLA HOUSING section); this practice is known as harem breeding. Up to 20% of all females may never breed, which often is due to incompatibility with the male. In cases such as this, changing of the male may raise the conception rate.

The gestation period is 111 days on the average, with a range of 105-115 days. There are no obvious signs of impending parturition (giving birth). Most births, however, take place in the morning. Usually two babies are born, but litter size varies between one and five.

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