Chinchilla Housing

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Chinchillas are nocturnal animals, which in the wild, live high up in the Andes Mountains in South America. There, the temperature and humidity are relatively low, and things are pretty quiet. As much as possible, we should try to duplicate those surroundings for chinchillas in captivity.

Temperature, humidity, cage location

Temperature: In the wild, chinchillas normally live at a relatively high altitude - over 12,000 feet. Their normal environmental temperature is cool and dry. Therefore, in captivity, they do best when housed at temperatures between 55 and 70ºF. They are very susceptible to heat stroke, which can occur when temperatures are 82º or above.

If the temperature becomes too warm, turn up the air conditioner, or give them a large, covered (so they cannot fall in) cooking pan filled with ice cubes. They will lie down next to it to cool themselves. Fans will probably NOT help. Fans cool us because we perspire and the perspiration evaporating off of our bodies cools us down. Chinchillas do not sweat, however, so to cool down, they actually need their surrounding temperature to cool down.

> To predict the possibility of heat stroke, add the value of the temperature (ºF) and the humidity. If the sum is greater than 150, the situation is dangerous. For example, 80ºF plus a 70% humidity = 150, and is a recipe for disaster.

Humidity: Chinchillas do best in low humidity (40-50%), so the room they are in must be well-ventilated and NOT damp. If the humidity is too low, however, as occurs in some Northern houses in the winter, chinchillas may lose hair and be more prone to respiratory illnesses.

Location: Locate the cage in a well-lit area. Do not place the cage in direct sunlight or in drafts.

You want to be able to see your chinchillas and have them near you, but we need to use common sense. If your household is extremely active, the chinchillas may be better off if they live in a quieter room. Stressed chinchillas will be unhappy and more susceptible to disease. If the cage is in a busy area, covering it with a thin cotton cloth during the day may help.

Finally, be sure there are no electrical cords or wires, or other dangerous items near the cage. Your chinchilla could reach through the cage and start to chew on them.

Cage size, shape, and construction

When it comes to cage size, basically, the bigger the better. Chinchillas are very active, have a lot of energy, and love to climb. The more room she has, both horizontally and vertically, the happier your chinchilla will be. For a single animal, the cage should be at least 30" tall, 24" wide and 15" deep. A 6 x 6 x 3 foot cage would be ideal. Cages with 'multiple stories,' often referred to as 'condo cages,' allow your chinchilla to move in many directions and are recommended. Ramps lead from one 'floor' to the other. If your cage does not have multiple levels, a shelf high up in the cage, with a ramp leading to it, should be provided.

Typically, chinchilla cages are made of wire mesh. Do not use painted or coated mesh since the chinchilla will chew it off. Glass aquariums or plastic containers are not recommended since they have poor ventilation. Wooden cages are also not recommended because your chinchilla will soon gnaw his way out of it.

The floor of the cage can be solid, or made of wire mesh. If the floor is solid, it will be more difficult to keep clean if the bottom is not easily removable. Some cages have attached bottom trays, which are easy to remove and clean. Solid-bottomed cages may be lined with pine wood shavings or newspaper.

Cages with wire mesh floors may have a removable tray underneath which pulls out like a drawer, or the droppings may fall to the floor. In either case, newspapers work well to catch the droppings. Cages with the tray close to the wire mesh floor allow less room for drafts. The floor mesh should be ½ x ½ inch so the chinchilla will not be able to get a leg caught in it. It is a good idea to put a small piece of pine board on the floor of wire mesh cages. This provides the chinchilla with a place to get off of the wire bottom, and also gives the chin another chew toy.

For cages with multiple levels, it is best to have a tray under each level. Upper level trays prevent the droppings from falling down to the lower level and possibly contaminating the food.

Sleeping area/hide box

In the wild, chinchillas live on rocky ledges with all types of holes and tunnels into which they can run and hide, or just sleep. Provide your chinchilla with a 'hide box' into which she can retreat when necessary. A (nontoxic) wood house will provide a good place for sleeping, but will also be chewed, so plan on replacing it periodically. Four inch sections of Y- and T-shaped PVC plumbing pipes also make good hiding spots and are easy to clean. Cardboard boxes can also be used. Again, plan to replace them regularly, and choose boxes without ink.

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Housing more than one

Chinchillas in captivity tend to do better when they are not housed together. Females, especially, may become aggressive towards each other. If chinchillas are housed together, they will need a larger than usual cage.

Food dishes

Feeders which are up high and attached to the side of the cage are preferred; 'hoppers' are one type. Small food dishes on the bottom of the cage tend to be tipped over, or the chinchilla may urinate or defecate in the food, contaminating it.

A separate dish for treats is sometimes advised, so the chin will not take all the food out of the main dish, looking for treats.

Water

Fresh water should be available at all times. Water bottles with a metal drinking spout are recommended. Glass bottles are preferred since chins may chew a hole through plastic ones. If you do use plastic, hang the bottle outside of the cage, with the metal spout pointing in. Place thin wire mesh between the bottle and the cage. You may be able to find a metal encasing for the water bottle to also protect it from being chewed. Glass bottles are also preferred because they can be put through the dishwasher – get two so you can wash one while the other is being used.

Wash water bottles at least three times per week with soap and water. Washing them in the dishwasher will help cut down bacterial and mold build up.

Sanitation

Chinchillas have very little odor if their cages are kept clean. The cage should be made out of materials that are easy to clean. Use soap and water to scrub it periodically, and be sure to rinse well so there is no residue of soap or disinfectant. Loose hair can be removed from the wire mesh with a bottle brush.

How often you need to change the droppings tray depends on the size of the cage. It should be changed at least once a week. Your chinchilla may tend to urinate only in one corner of the cage. In this case, you can line that area more heavily. If your cage does not have a wire mesh bottom, and the chinchilla is directly on top of the shavings or other substrate, you will need to clean the cage more often to prevent infections.

As mentioned previously, water bottles should be cleaned at least every other day, and food dishes should be washed with soap and water.

Dust baths

Ideally, dust baths should be provided daily, or at least several times a week. They are necessary for the chinchilla's health and to prevent matting and keep the fur soft, clean, and in good condition. Sanitized chinchilla dust, or a 9:1 mixture of silver sand or volcanic ash and Fuller's earth can be used. Do NOT use beach sand or builder's sand. Place about one inch of dust in a shallow pan that is large enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Allow the chinchilla access to the dust bath for 20-60 minutes a day. Remove any fecal contamination of the dust. The dust may be reused until it becomes overly contaminated or appears clumpy. If you have more than one chinchilla, have a separate dust bath for each to prevent spread of diseases.

Never wash your chinchilla with water. If she does get wet, roll her up in a towel or use a hair dryer set on low, making sure it is not too hot.

Toys and recreation

Wheels: Chinchillas are very active animals, and like lots of exercise. An exercise wheel is almost a 'must.' Ideally, the wheel should be 15 inches in diameter. Wheels that have ball bearings are preferred. Some wheels can be attached to the side of the cage. This makes it easier for the chin to easily hop in and out of the wheel. It is generally recommended to remove the wheels when there are baby chinchillas in the cage so they do not get caught in or hurt by the wheel. As they grow in size, introduce the wheel so they become used to it while they are young. You can teach an old chinchilla new tricks, but they learn better when they are young and have a lot of energy.

Chew toys: Chinchillas love to chew, and a variety of chewing toys should be provided. Since teeth in chinchillas continually grow (up to 3" per year), chins need to chew to keep their teeth short and straight. Actual 'chinchilla blocks,' pumice blocks, and nontoxic wood can all be used to help keep their teeth short and straight. Parrot toys made of wood also work well. Be careful about what wood you give to your chinchilla since some can be toxic. Do not allow your chinchilla to chew on painted or treated wood.

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Good Woods	Bad Woods
• Mulberry • Apple • Pear • Hazelnut • Manzanita • Willow	• Any citrus wood such as orange, grapefruit, or lemon • Cherry - wild Cherry • Plum • Walnut • Cedar • Fresh pine, which may have too much pitch

Climbing toys: Chinchillas, in their natural environment, run up and down rocky ledges like billy goats. They love to climb. Every cage should have rocks, branches (of nontoxic wood), and other items in their cage onto which they can climb. The vertical space needs to be just as interesting as the horizontal space.

Summary

Duplicating the chinchilla's natural environment as much as possible will make for a healthy and happy pet. Provide them with a cool, dry environment, and clean food and water. They love to climb and chew, so give them plenty of height, and multiple things to chew and play with.

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