

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Chinchilla

Cool rooms, dust baths and a diet built on hay



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

Welcome to the most particular little mountain animal you will ever share a home with! Chinchillas are gentle, wildly clever, astonishingly soft and — we'll be honest with you right up front — fussier about their environment than almost any other pet in our catalog. Get two things right, temperature and diet, and a chinchilla can be part of your family for fifteen years or more. Get those two things wrong and things go badly very fast. This guide is written by the family behind Walnut Creek Supply here in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, for the first-time owner who wants the honest version — no mystery ingredients, no marketing fluff, no advice that sells more treats at the expense of your animal. Read the first three sections before your chinchilla comes home. Everything else you can grow into.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

Your chinchilla's first two days with you are about one thing: a cool, quiet, boring room. Not bonding. Not handling. Not showing the kids. Work this list in order.

1. **Check the room temperature before the chinchilla arrives — this comes first, ahead of everything else.** Put a digital thermometer and humidity gauge (hygrometer) where the cage will sit, at cage height, and read it at the *hottest* part of the day, not the coolest. You are aiming for **60–70°F (15–21°C)**. If that room climbs past **77°F (25°C)** at any point in the day, it is not a safe room, and you need a cooler one or active air conditioning before you bring the animal home. Chinchillas cannot shed heat, and heat stroke can kill in a matter of hours.
2. **Set the cage up fully before arrival.** Tall cage, solid shelves, bedding down, hay rack loaded, water bottle filled, a cooling slab on the bottom level, one or two safe wood chews. Do not add the dust bath yet.
3. **Put a generous pile of loose grass hay in the cage** — timothy or orchard grass, as much as they'll eat. Hay is the single most important thing in the enclosure. A stressed chinchilla that keeps eating hay is a chinchilla that stays out of trouble.
4. **Offer a small, measured portion of plain pellets** — about 1 tablespoon. If you know what food the breeder or store was using, use the same pellet for the first two weeks and transition slowly after. Abrupt food changes upset a chinchilla's gut.
5. **Fill the water bottle with fresh, cool water** and check that the ball bearing moves freely. Watch for them drinking in the first day.
6. **Move them in and then leave them alone.** Open the carrier into the cage, step back, and give them 24–48 hours with no handling at all. Talk to them quietly when you pass. Top up hay, change water, remove droppings from shelves — that's it.
7. **Keep the room dim and quiet in the day, and expect activity at dawn and dusk.** Chinchillas are **crepuscular**, meaning their natural active hours are around sunrise and sunset. Daytime napping is normal and healthy, not a sign of illness.
8. **Watch three things and write them down:** is hay disappearing, is water going down, and are there plenty of dry, firm droppings. All three present and steady means the transition is going well.
9. **Offer the first dust bath on day three or four**, once they're settled. Ten to fifteen minutes, then take it out again.
10. **Find your exotics vet now, not later.** Call ahead and confirm they see chinchillas, and save the number and the nearest after-hours emergency exotics clinic on your phone. A chinchilla that stops eating is an emergency, and that is not the moment to be searching the internet.

First-Time Starter Bundle

Here's what actually matters, by category. Buy the cage, hay, pellets, dust and cooling slab before day one; the rest can follow in the first week.

Essentials

- **A tall, multi-level wire cage with a solid base.** Look for powder-coated or galvanized metal, bar spacing no wider than 1 inch, a removable tray, and a wide door you can get two hands through. Height and climbing levels matter more than floor area.
- **Solid shelves and ledges in untreated kiln-dried pine, apple or willow.** Wire shelving causes foot injuries and sore hocks. If the cage came with wire shelves, cover or replace them.
- **Loose grass hay — timothy or orchard grass — by the box, not the handful.** Look for green color, a sweet smell, long soft strands, and minimal dust or brown stems. You will go through more than you expect.
- **A plain, uniform chinchilla pellet.** Every piece should look identical. No colored bits, no seeds, no dried fruit, no nuts. Timothy-based, roughly 16–20% protein and 15–35% fiber.
- **A glass water bottle with a metal sipper tube.** Glass because they chew plastic. Bottles beat bowls — bowls end up full of dust, bedding and wet fur.
- **Chinchilla dust (not sand) and a heavy, enclosed bathing house.** Look for finely milled pumice or sepiolite-type dust. Sand is too coarse and does not wick oils from the coat.
- **A granite, marble or unglazed ceramic cooling slab.** Cheap, indestructible, and one of the best pieces of heat insurance you can own.
- **Paper-based bedding or kiln-dried pine or aspen shavings.** Low dust, unscented, absorbent.
- **A digital thermometer and hygrometer.** Not optional. This is your early warning system.
- **A hay rack or hay feeder** that keeps the pile off the floor and out of the droppings.
- **A hard carrier** for vet trips — small, enclosed, chew-resistant.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: Critter Enclosures and Critter Bedding and Accessories.

Enrichment

- **Untreated wood chews in variety** — apple, willow, hazel, kiln-dried pine, aspen. Several shapes and hardnesses, replaced as they're destroyed. This is dental equipment disguised as a toy.
- **A pumice stone or lava chew** for gnawing and incidental nail wear.
- **A solid-surface exercise wheel, 14 inches or larger, in metal.** Wire or mesh running surfaces catch feet and tails. Small wheels force a curved spine.
- **A hanging or shelf-mounted wooden hideout or tunnel** big enough to turn around in, with two exits.
- **Woven grass or seagrass mats and balls** — chewable, shreddable, replaceable.
- **Hay-stuffable foraging toys** — a cardboard tube packed with hay beats any sugary treat as a reward.
- **A wooden or willow ledge near the top of the cage** to perch and survey the room from. Chinchillas like height.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Critter Toys and Accessories.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Chinchilla

A fifteen-year animal

Chinchillas routinely live **10–20 years** in good care, with most landing somewhere in the 12–15 range. That is a genuinely long time — longer than many dogs, and long enough that a chinchilla bought for a ten-year-old will still be alive when that child finishes college. Please sit with that before you buy. It means planning for a decade and a half of air conditioning in summer, hay in the house, exotics vet bills in later life, and someone to care for them when you travel. Chinchillas are also creatures of deep routine; rehoming is hard on them. We'd much rather you take a week to decide than take one home on a Saturday whim.

In exchange you get an animal with real personality and a long memory. A well-socialised chinchilla recognizes their person, comes to the cage front, takes a chew from your fingers, and does spectacular vertical bounces off three walls in a row when they're pleased with life — the famous "popcorn." They are expressive, and they chirp, bark, squeak and grumble at each other and at you.

Size and build

Adults run roughly **9–14 inches (23–36 cm) in body length** with a bushy tail of another **3–6 inches (8–15 cm)**, and weigh **400–800 grams (about 1–1.75 lb)**. Females are typically the larger sex, which is unusual among rodents. Underneath all that fur is a surprisingly light, delicate, athletic animal built for leaping between rocks — fine bones, powerful hind legs, and a ribcage you can injure with a firm squeeze. They feel like a cloud and they handle like a soap bubble.

The densest fur on land

A chinchilla grows **more than fifty hairs out of a single follicle** — somewhere in the range of 50–80 depending on the animal and the body region — which gives them the densest fur of any land mammal. In the Andes that coat is survival equipment at high altitude. In your living room it is a liability, because the same density that traps warmth makes it nearly impossible for them to dump excess heat. They have no sweat glands to speak of and shed heat mainly through their big thin ears.

That coat is also why chinchillas never, ever get wet. Water soaks in, cannot dry out, and you end up with a chilled animal and a warm damp environment at skin level where fungus thrives.

Fur slip

Fur slip is a defense mechanism: when a chinchilla is grabbed or badly frightened, it voluntarily releases a clean patch of fur, leaving the predator — or you — holding a tuft while the animal escapes. It is startling the first time and it does not hurt them, but it leaves a bald, slightly uneven patch that can take **several weeks to several months** to grow back in fully. Fur slip is feedback. It means you grabbed instead of scooped, or something in the room frightened them badly. Repeated fur slip means your handling needs rethinking.

Why they're a poor match for a small child wanting a cuddle

We say this kindly, because it disappoints people. Chinchillas are not cuddly pets. Most tolerate rather than enjoy being held, they do not like being restrained, they startle easily, they are most awake when children are asleep, and they are physically fragile — a dropped chinchilla is a badly injured chinchilla. They also chew absolutely everything, which means supervised out-of-cage time only. A chinchilla can absolutely be a wonderful family animal for a patient older child or teenager who finds watching and hand-feeding rewarding. For a five-year-old who wants to carry a soft thing around the house, a chinchilla will end in tears for everyone. A guinea pig or a well-socialised rabbit is a far kinder answer to that wish.

Dust bathing is a need, not a treat

In the wild, chinchillas roll in fine volcanic dust to strip excess oil and moisture out of that dense coat. Without regular access to dust, the coat goes greasy, mats at the base, and becomes a hospitable place for fungal skin infection. So dust is husbandry, not enrichment — but like most good things it goes wrong when overdone, which is why we schedule it rather than leave the bath in the cage. Full details in the bedding and dust section.

What surprises new owners

- **How much hay they go through,** and how much hay dust and stem ends up around the cage. Chinchillas are messy eaters by design.
- **How loud they are at 11pm.** Thumping, bouncing, wheel running, and the distinctive rattle of a chinchilla rearranging their own cage. Many owners end up moving the cage out of the bedroom.
- **How little they actually eat.** A tablespoon or two of pellets a day looks like nothing next to all that hay, and that is correct.
- **That droppings are constant and dry,** and that counting them is a real diagnostic skill. Fewer droppings than yesterday is an early alarm.
- **That they eat some of their own droppings on purpose.** This is **caecotrophy** — the re-ingestion of soft, nutrient-rich caecal pellets produced in the hindgut — and it is normal, necessary, and not a sign of anything wrong.
- **How much the room temperature dictates your life** between June and September.
- **That nothing plastic survives.** Not food bowls, not cable covers, not the corner of a baseboard, not the cage's own plastic trim.
- **How long taming takes.** Weeks of sitting by the cage before you get the first voluntary hop onto your hand. It's worth it.

SECTION 3

Temperature, Humidity & Where to Put the Cage

This is the section that saves lives, so we're going to be blunt. **Heat is the number one killer of pet chinchillas in American homes.** Not diet, not predators, not accidents — heat. Every summer, exotics vets see chinchillas that were "fine yesterday" in a room that got to the low 80s while nobody was home.

The numbers

Condition	Temperature	Humidity	What it means	What to do
Ideal	60–70°F (15–21°C)	30–50%	Comfortable, safe year-round target	Maintain and monitor daily
Acceptable	70–75°F (21–24°C)	Under 50%	Tolerable with airflow and a cooling slab	Add fan circulation, cool slab, check twice daily
Caution	75–77°F (24–25°C)	Under 50%	Upper limit. Heat stress begins	Cool the room actively now. Do not leave unattended
Danger	Above 77°F (25°C)	Any	Real risk of heat stroke	Move to a cooler room or run A/C immediately
Emergency	Above 80°F (27°C)	Any	Heat stroke likely within hours	Treat as a medical emergency. Cool and call a vet
Humid risk	Any above 72°F (22°C)	Above 55%	Heat cannot be shed even at moderate temperature	Dehumidify and cool. Treat as one band hotter
Too cold	Below 50°F (10°C)	Any	Rarely a problem but avoid drafts	Move off cold floors, block drafts, no damp

A useful shorthand many chinchilla keepers use is the **combined heat index**: add the temperature in °F to the relative humidity percentage, and keep the total under **150**. So 75°F with 40% humidity (115) is fine; 75°F with 70% humidity (145) is borderline; 80°F with 70% humidity (150) is dangerous. Humidity matters because a chinchilla's limited cooling depends on moving heat out through the ears and respiratory tract, and muggy air shuts that down. A humid 76°F room is more dangerous than a dry 76°F room.

Where figures are genuinely debated — and the exact danger threshold is, with reputable sources placing it anywhere from 75°F to 80°F — we give you the cautious end. There is no benefit to running a chinchilla warm, and there is enormous downside.

Signs of overheating

Learn these cold. In order of escalating seriousness:

- **Bright red, hot ears** — the earliest and most reliable sign. Ears are the radiator; when they flush, the animal is working to dump heat.
- **Lying stretched out flat on their side or belly**, often on the coolest surface they can find, rather than sitting upright in the usual loaf.
- **Lethargy and unresponsiveness** — not reacting to you, to food, to the sound of the dust bath.
- **Droping, or wet fur around the mouth and chin.**
- **Rapid, shallow, or laboured breathing**; open-mouth breathing is very serious.

- **Staggering, falling over, seizures, or collapse** — this is late-stage and the animal may already be dying.

What to do immediately

1. **Move the chinchilla to the coolest room in the house** right away — a basement, a tiled bathroom, an air-conditioned room. Get the ambient temperature down to 60–65°F (15–18°C).
2. **Put them on a chilled granite, marble or unglazed ceramic slab.** Keep a spare slab in the freezer in summer for exactly this. Conduction through the feet and belly is the fastest safe way to pull heat out.
3. **Move air across them with a fan,** aimed to circulate the room rather than blasted directly at the animal.
4. **Cool the ears and feet only,** with a cool — not icy — damp cloth dabbed on the ear surfaces and footpads. Those are the heat-exchange surfaces.
5. **Do not wet the body, do not submerge, do not use ice baths.** Soaking that coat traps heat against the skin, cannot dry, risks a dangerous cold swing, and sets up fungal infection. Ice-cold water causes surface blood vessels to clamp shut, which actually slows heat loss and can send a weakened animal into shock.
6. **Offer cool fresh water** but never force water into the mouth of a collapsed or seizing animal.
7. **Call your exotics vet now, even if they seem to recover.** Heat stroke causes internal organ and neurological damage that shows up hours later. A chinchilla that bounces back in twenty minutes still needs to be seen the same day.

Where to put the cage

- **The coolest, most stable room in the house.** North-facing rooms, interior rooms, basements and finished lower levels are usually best. Many families relocate the cage seasonally and that is completely fine.
- **Never in direct sunlight,** and never where a patch of sun will move onto the cage later in the day. A cage that is shaded at 9am may be in full sun at 3pm.
- **Never in a conservatory, sunroom, glassed porch, attic, garage, shed or uninsulated outbuilding.** These spaces swing twenty degrees in an afternoon and have killed a great many chinchillas.
- **Away from radiators, heat vents, wood stoves, kitchen appliances and the back of electronics.**
- **Off the floor if the floor is cold and drafty,** but out of the warm air that pools near a ceiling. Remember that heat rises: the top shelf of a tall cage can be several degrees warmer than the base, so always offer a cool surface low down.
- **Away from direct A/C blast and household drafts.** Cool is good; a cold jet of air blowing onto a sleeping animal is not.
- **Somewhere you'll actually hear them,** but not your bedroom unless you sleep soundly. They get loud at night.
- **Away from heavy household traffic, dogs, cats and televisions.** Chronic stress shows up as fur chewing and poor appetite.

Winter is rarely the problem

Chinchillas are mountain animals with a coat built for freezing nights, and a normally heated home is never too cold for them. Comfortable down into the 50s°F (10–15°C) without fuss. What they *don't* tolerate in winter is **damp, drafts and sudden swings** — a cage in front of a leaky window, or a room that goes from 68°F to 45°F overnight. Keep them dry, keep them out of the draft, give them a hideout to tuck into, and skip the heat lamps and snuggle pads sold for other small pets. Those are a genuine hazard here. If anything, winter is the season you get to relax a little.

SECTION 4

Housing & Cage Setup

A chinchilla cage is a climbing frame, not a floor plan. In the wild they live in rock crevices and move vertically, leaping confidently between ledges. The best enclosure you can build gives them **height, multiple solid levels, and varied jump distances** — a tall cage with four good shelves will be used far more completely than a wide flat cage with the same square footage, because flat space simply isn't how a chinchilla moves. If you're choosing between tall and wide at the same price, choose tall.

Minimum dimensions

Setup	Minimum width	Minimum depth	Minimum height	Levels	Notes
One chinchilla (absolute minimum)	24 in (61 cm)	24 in (61 cm)	48 in (122 cm)	3	Workable only with daily out-of-cage time
One chinchilla (recommended)	36 in (91 cm)	24 in (61 cm)	60 in (152 cm)	4	Comfortable long-term housing
Bonded pair (minimum)	36 in (91 cm)	24 in (61 cm)	60 in (152 cm)	4	Two hideouts, two hay racks, two water bottles
Bonded pair (recommended)	48 in (122 cm)	24 in (61 cm)	72 in (183 cm)	5	Room to avoid each other, which prevents fights
Bar spacing (adults)	0.5–1 in (1.3–2.5 cm)	—	—	—	Never wider than 1 in; heads and legs get through
Bar spacing (kits under 6 months)	0.5 in (1.3 cm) max	—	—	—	Young kits escape through 1 in bars
Shelf spacing	—	—	10–16 in (25–40 cm) apart	—	Stagger them; avoid any single drop over 18 in
Wheel diameter	14 in (36 cm) minimum	—	—	—	15–16 in preferred. Solid running surface, metal

Bigger is always better, and vertical inches are the cheapest improvement you can make. A tall cage also gives the animal a genuine choice of microclimates: cool slab at the bottom, cosy hideout in the middle, lookout perch at the top.

What the cage must be made of

Metal and untreated wood. That's the list. Powder-coated or galvanized wire for the frame, solid wood for the shelves. Avoid cages with plastic shelves, plastic ramps, plastic bases, plastic trim or plastic corner clips, because a chinchilla will reduce all of it to splinters within a week or two. Swallowed plastic does not pass — it causes gut blockages that are expensive at best and fatal at worst. If a cage you already own has plastic parts, remove them and replace with wood or metal before the chinchilla moves in. The same goes for plastic hideouts, plastic wheels, plastic food bowls and plastic water bottles.

Solid floors and solid shelves only. Standing on wire causes sore, ulcerated hocks and footpads, and open wire shelving catches toes and legs — chinchillas jump hard and land fast, and a foot through a gap at speed means a broken leg. If your cage came with wire shelves, cover them with solid untreated wood or replace them outright. The same logic applies to the wheel: **solid metal running surface, never wire mesh or rungs**, which trap feet and tails.

Safe shelf, ledge and chew woods

Use **untreated, unpainted, unvarnished, kiln-dried** wood only.

- **Reliably safe:** kiln-dried pine, aspen, apple, pear, willow, hazel, poplar, birch, elm, cottonwood, grapevine, manzanita (very hard, great for wear).
- **Avoid:** cedar and fresh non-kiln-dried pine (aromatic phenol oils irritate the airway and liver), all stone-fruit woods — cherry, plum, peach, apricot, nectarine (cyanogenic compounds), walnut, oak, redwood, yew, laurel, oleander, citrus, and anything from a tree treated with pesticide.
- **Never:** plywood, MDF, chipboard, particle board or anything glued or laminated. The adhesives are not food, and a chinchilla will eat the shelf.

Expect to replace shelves every so often. That's the system working — a chewed shelf is wear that didn't happen to their teeth.

A labeled layout that works

Picture a tall rectangular cage, viewed from the front, with the following arrangement from top to bottom. This is a layout you can sketch straight onto paper and then build.

- **Top level — the lookout.** A full-width solid pine shelf running the back of the cage, with a smaller apple-wood ledge offset to one side a little below it. Chinchillas like to sit at the highest point and watch the room. Nothing else up here; leave it open for perching.
- **Upper-middle level — the hay station.** A metal hay rack mounted on the cage wall at this level, loaded from outside, with a solid shelf directly beneath it so they can sit and pull hay comfortably. Mount the **glass water bottle** beside it, sipper tube through the bars, metal sipper, bracket on the outside where it can't be chewed.
- **Middle level — the sleeping quarters.** A wooden hideout or tunnel with two exits, big enough for the animal to turn around in, sitting on a solid shelf. If you keep a pair, two hideouts on two different levels so neither can be cornered.
- **Lower-middle level — the wheel.** A 15-inch solid metal wheel, securely mounted so it cannot wobble or fall, with clear space around it. A hanging willow ball or grass mat on the opposite wall at this height.
- **Bottom level — the cool floor.** Solid base with a removable tray, bedding down 1–2 inches deep, and a **granite or ceramic cooling slab** laid flat in the coolest corner. Scatter 2–3 wood chews and a pumice stone here. This is also where the **litter area** sets up.
- **Litter area.** Chinchillas urinate mostly in one chosen corner while dropping dry fecal pellets everywhere. Watch for a week, find the corner they've picked, and put a metal or ceramic litter pan there with paper-based bedding in it. Scoop that pan daily and you will cut cage odour dramatically. Do not use clumping cat litter in it, ever.
- **Door.** Wide, front-opening, positioned so you can reach the middle levels with both hands. Latches that a clever chinchilla cannot work — they absolutely try, and they are good at it.

A few extra fitting notes: mount everything so there are no gaps a leg can slip through between shelf and wall; keep the full-depth shelves staggered so a fall from the top can't go all the way to the floor; and site the dust bath, when it's in, on the bottom level where spilled dust is easy to sweep up.

SECTION 5

Bedding & Dust Baths

Bedding

Bedding has one job: absorb urine and stay low-dust. Chinchillas don't burrow or nest the way hamsters do, so you need **1–2 inches (3–5 cm)** in the tray and in the litter pan — not a deep bed.

Bedding type	Verdict	Why
Paper-based (plain, unscented)	Best choice	Very absorbent, low dust, safe if nibbled, controls odour well
Kiln-dried pine shavings	Good choice	Kilning drives off the aromatic oils; absorbent and economical
Aspen shavings	Good choice	Naturally free of aromatic oils, low dust, widely available
Hemp bedding	Good choice	Low dust, very absorbent, compostable
Fleece liners over a solid base	Workable	Reusable and dust-free, but needs washing every 2–3 days and chinchillas chew edges
Shredded plain paper or paper towel	Backup only	Safe but poor odour control; fine in a pinch
Cedar shavings	Never	Aromatic phenols irritate the airway and stress the liver
Fresh, non-kiln-dried pine	Avoid	Same phenol problem as cedar, to a lesser degree
Scented or "odour-control" bedding	Never	Added fragrance irritates a sensitive respiratory tract
Any cat litter, especially clumping	Never	Clumping clay swells in the gut and causes fatal blockages; dusty and abrasive
Corn cob bedding	Avoid	Molds readily, poor absorbency, impaction risk if eaten
Straw	Avoid	Barely absorbent, sharp stems can injure eyes
Sawdust or very fine shavings	Avoid	Far too dusty for chinchilla lungs

Spot-clean the tray and litter pan daily, strip and replace bedding weekly, and wash the tray with a mild unscented soap or a vinegar solution — not a strongly perfumed cleaner.

Dust baths

Chinchilla **dust** is a finely milled, almost powdery mineral product, usually pumice or a sepiolite-type clay. It is not sand. Sand grains are too coarse and too heavy to work their way to the skin and wick out oil and moisture, and coarse grit abrades the hair shaft. If it feels gritty between your fingers rather than slippery like talc, it's the wrong product.

Offer dust in a **heavy, enclosed house or a deep, wide bowl they can't tip** — chinchillas roll vigorously and will throw dust several feet in a cheerful whirl. Put **2–3 inches (5–8 cm)** of dust in, enough that they can flip right over in it.

Element	Guideline
Frequency (average home, normal humidity)	2–3 times per week

Element	Guideline
Frequency (dry climate or winter heating)	2 times per week
Frequency (humid summer weather)	3–4 times per week
Session length	10–15 minutes
Dust depth	2–3 in (5–8 cm)
Dust replacement	Sift out droppings after each use; fully replace every 2–4 weeks
Left in the cage permanently	Never
Best time of day	Early evening, as they wake up

Why removing the bath matters. Left in the cage, a dust bath becomes three problems at once. It turns into a latrine, because chinchillas will happily urinate in loose substrate — and then they roll in it. It gets over-used, because a chinchilla will bathe for the pleasure of it well past the point of usefulness. And it keeps a fine airborne dust in the enclosure permanently, which irritates eyes and airways. Ten to fifteen minutes, then out.

What happens if you get the frequency wrong. Too little dust and the coat turns greasy and limp, mats and clumps form at the skin, the fur loses its characteristic bounce, and you create warm damp conditions at skin level where ringworm takes hold. Too much dust and you swing the other way: dry, flaky, itchy skin, a brittle-looking coat, and irritated watery eyes or mild conjunctivitis from dust in the eyes. If your chinchilla's coat looks dull and separated into locks, add a session. If their eyes are weepy after bathing and the skin looks flaky, cut back and shorten sessions. Adjust seasonally — humid Pennsylvania Augusts need more dust than dry heated Januaries.

Finally, and this one is worth tattooing somewhere: **never bathe a chinchilla in water.** More on that in the FAQ, but the short version is that the coat does not dry, and a damp chinchilla is a hypothermic, fungal-infected chinchilla.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition



Unlimited grass hay, a small measured portion of plain pellets, and almost nothing else.

If temperature is the thing that kills chinchillas quickly, diet is the thing that ruins them slowly. A chinchilla's digestive system and teeth evolved for one job: processing enormous volumes of tough, dry, low-nutrient mountain grasses. Their gut is a fiber-fermentation engine that needs to be kept constantly turning, and their teeth need constant abrasive grinding to stay the right length. Feed them what the pet aisle sells as "chinchilla food" — the colorful mix with dried fruit and seeds and yogurt drops — and you will be paying an exotics vet to grind their teeth within three years.

The whole correct diet is this: **unlimited grass hay, a measured portion of plain pellets, and fresh water.** That's it. Everything else is garnish, and most of it is harmful.

Hay is the foundation, not the side dish

Loose grass hay should make up 80–90% of what your chinchilla actually eats, available free-choice, twenty-four hours a day. Not a compressed cube, not a pressed stick, not a token sprig — a generous pile of long-strand loose hay, roughly the size of the chinchilla's own body, replaced daily even if some remains.

- **Timothy hay** is the standard first choice: high fiber, modest protein, modest calcium.

- **Orchard grass** is a great alternative, often softer and sweeter-smelling, and useful for fussy eaters or owners with timothy allergies.
- **Meadow hay, brome and oat hay** make good variety; rotating two types keeps interest up and heads off fussiness.
- **Avoid alfalfa as the everyday hay** (see below).

What to look for when you buy: green rather than yellow-brown, a sweet fresh smell, long flexible strands, visible seed heads, and minimal dust or shattered leaf at the bottom of the bag. Store it somewhere cool, dark and dry with airflow — never sealed in plastic, which traps moisture and grows mold. Reject anything that smells musty, sour or like a damp basement. Moldy hay causes serious illness.

Hay does two things no pellet can. It keeps the hindgut full and moving, which is the single best protection against the bloat and gut stasis that put chinchillas in emergency care. And it provides long, side-to-side chewing strokes that wear the molars evenly, which is the only real protection against dental disease.

The pellet: plain, uniform, boring

Your pellet should be the most visually boring food in your house. **Every single piece identical.** Uniform color, uniform size, uniform shape. If you can pick out a green bit, an orange bit, a sunflower seed, a corn kernel, a raisin, a banana chip or anything shaped like a cereal loop, it is the wrong bag.

What to look for on the label:

- **Timothy or grass-hay based** as the first ingredient (alfalfa-based only for growing, pregnant or nursing animals).
- **Crude protein roughly 16–20%.**
- **Crude fiber 15% minimum, and higher is better** — look for 18% and up.
- **Crude fat 2–5%. Low.**
- **No added sugars, molasses, dried fruit, seeds, nuts, corn or colored extrusions.**
- **Fresh stock.** Pellets lose vitamin C and palatability with age; check the date and buy a bag size you'll finish in about three months.
- Rabbit and guinea pig pellets are *not* interchangeable substitutes long-term — guinea pig formulas are supplemented with vitamin C and often different in protein and calcium. In a true emergency a plain timothy rabbit pellet for a day or two beats nothing, but get the right food.

Daily amounts

Life stage	Grass hay	Pellets per day	Alfalfa	Fresh water
Adult, 7 months and older	Unlimited timothy or orchard	1–2 tbsp (about 25–35 g)	None, or an occasional single strand	Unlimited, changed daily
Juvenile, under 7 months	Unlimited timothy or orchard	2 tbsp, free-choice if growing well	Alfalfa hay or alfalfa-based pellet appropriate	Unlimited, changed daily
Pregnant or nursing female	Unlimited timothy or orchard	Free-choice	Alfalfa hay offered daily	Unlimited, changed twice daily
Senior, 10 years and older	Unlimited soft orchard or meadow	1–2 tbsp, adjusted to body condition	Only on vet advice	Unlimited, changed daily
Overweight adult	Unlimited timothy or orchard	1 tbsp, no treats at all	None	Unlimited, changed daily

Life stage	Grass hay	Pellets per day	Alfalfa	Fresh water
Underweight or recovering	Unlimited, plus a second hay type	2 tbsp, vet-guided	Vet-guided	Unlimited, changed daily

Measure the pellets. Don't eyeball them and don't top up a bowl that still has food in it. A chinchilla given unlimited pellets will eat pellets instead of hay, because pellets are easier, and that is how you get an overweight chinchilla with worn-out molars and a sluggish gut. One small, heavy ceramic or metal bowl, one measured portion, once a day, same time each day.

Why muesli-style and treat-studded mixes cause real damage

A mixed food with visible pieces invites **selective feeding**: the chinchilla eats the sugary, fatty, fun bits — the fruit, the seeds, the corn, the flakes — and leaves the fibrous pellet behind. You end up with an animal on a high-sugar, high-fat, low-fiber diet while the bag empties and you reasonably assume they're eating their food. From there, three things happen in sequence. Gut fermentation shifts toward the wrong bacteria, producing gas and setting up bloat and diarrhea. Soft, sugary food requires almost no chewing, so the molars stop wearing down evenly and begin to develop uneven surfaces and spurs. And calories creep up while fiber falls, so the animal gains weight and the gut slows further. Dental disease, obesity and GI upset in chinchillas are very often the same story told three ways, and the story usually starts with a mixed bag of food that looked generous and fun.

The no-sugar rule

Chinchillas have an extremely limited ability to process sugar and fat. Their wild diet contains almost none of either. Sugar feeds the wrong gut flora and causes gas and bloat; fat causes liver problems and obesity; soft sweet food denies the teeth the abrasion they need. There is also credible concern that high sugar intake contributes to insulin dysregulation and cataract development in the species.

So here is the hard line, and we are sorry to be the ones to tell you that most of the "chinchilla treats" on the market belong on the right-hand column.

Safe — occasional, tiny	Never feed
1–2 plain dried rose hips, 2–3 times a week	All fresh fruit — apple, banana, berries, melon, grapes
A pinch of plain dried herbs: chamomile, dandelion leaf, plantain, nettle, rosehip leaf	All dried fruit — raisins, sultanas, cranberries, banana chips, papaya
A single dried calendula or hibiscus flower	Nuts of any kind, including peanuts and almonds
A few plain dried rose petals	Seeds of any kind — sunflower, pumpkin, flax, millet, birdseed
1 inch of dried oat or wheat grass stem	Corn, in any form, fresh or dried
A plain untreated willow or apple stick (as a chew, not food)	Yogurt drops and any dairy product
An extra pinch of a second grass hay as novelty	Honey or molasses sticks, "bars" and glazed treats
A half-teaspoon of plain rolled oats, no more than weekly	Fresh vegetables in quantity — carrot, lettuce, spinach, cabbage, broccoli
Nothing else	Bread, crackers, cereal, pasta, human snack food
Nothing else	Chocolate, caffeine, anything processed
Nothing else	Meat, eggs, insects or animal protein
Nothing else	Lawn clippings, unknown garden plants, houseplants

A note on vegetables, because people ask: a chinchilla's gut is not built for wet, fermentable fresh produce. A sliver of carrot or a leaf of romaine won't kill a healthy adult, but it offers nothing they need and is a very common cause of soft stool and diarrhea. Our honest advice is to skip fresh produce altogether and use dried herbs when you want to give something special. **Total treats of any kind: no more than a teaspoon-sized amount per week, and nothing at all for an overweight or recovering animal.**

Also: no store-bought "chinchilla salt licks" or mineral wheels with added molasses, and no vitamin supplements in the water unless your vet prescribed them. A correct hay-and-pellet diet needs no supplementation.

Water

Fresh, cool water available at all times, **changed every single day** even if the bottle looks full. Use a **glass bottle with a metal sipper tube** and an external bracket, because plastic bottles get chewed through and plastic spouts get gnawed into leaky stubs. Scrub the bottle and sipper with a bottle brush weekly — biofilm builds up inside fast and is a genuine infection source. Check the ball bearing moves freely every day; a stuck bottle means a chinchilla with no water, and in a warm room that becomes an emergency within a day. Tap water is usually fine; if your water is heavily softened or you're on a questionable well, use filtered. Bowls are not recommended — they fill with dust and bedding and wet the fur.

If you keep a pair, two bottles on different levels. Water is a resource worth guarding, and resource guarding is how pairings sour.

Alfalfa: growing and pregnant animals only

Alfalfa is a legume, not a grass. It's much higher in protein, calcium and calories than timothy, which makes it exactly right for an animal that is **building a skeleton or feeding kits** — juveniles under about seven months, pregnant females and nursing mothers. For a healthy adult, a steady alfalfa diet means excess calcium (contributing to urinary sludge and bladder stones) and excess calories. Transition growing animals off alfalfa and onto timothy gradually between six and eight months, mixing the two over a couple of weeks. A single strand of alfalfa as an occasional treat for an adult is harmless; a bag of it as the daily hay is not.

Caecotrophy, explained once so you stop worrying

You will, sooner or later, catch your chinchilla curled up eating a dropping. This is **caecotrophy**, and it is supposed to happen. Chinchillas ferment fiber in the caecum, a pouch in the hindgut, and some of the nutrients produced there — B vitamins, vitamin K, microbial protein — can only be absorbed by passing the material through the stomach and small intestine a second time. So the body produces two kinds of droppings: the dry, firm, oval fecal pellets you scoop out by the hundred, and softer, darker, shinier **caecotrophs** that the animal takes directly and eats, usually at rest and often overnight. You may never see one in the cage, which is normal — they rarely hit the floor.

What to do about it: nothing. Don't discourage it, don't clean it up, don't worry. It is a sign of a working digestive system. What is worth noticing is caecotrophs left uneaten and smeared around the cage, which can point to obesity (the animal physically can't reach), dental pain, arthritis, or a diet too rich in pellets. That's a vet conversation.

Shop the food and supplies: Browse Critter Food Treats & Feed.

SECTION 7

Dental Health

Dental disease is **the most common serious health problem in pet chinchillas**, and the single most preventable one. Understanding why takes about two minutes and will shape every feeding decision you make for the next fifteen years.

Teeth that never stop growing

A chinchilla has 20 teeth — four incisors at the front and sixteen cheek teeth (premolars and molars) behind — and **every one of them is open-rooted**, which means it grows continuously for life. The technical term is *elodont*, and the growth rate is substantial: incisors advance on the order of **2–3 inches (5–7 cm) per year**. The crowns are also *hypsodont*, very tall, with a long reserve crown sitting inside the jaw.

Healthy incisors are a deep yellow-orange — that's normal enamel pigment, not plaque, and pale white or chalky incisors can actually indicate a problem. They should meet evenly, with the uppers just overlapping the lowers.

Hay fiber is the only thing that wears them down

Nothing else does the job. Not wood chews (helpful for the incisors and for enrichment, but they barely touch the cheek teeth), not pumice stones, not mineral blocks, not pellets. **Chewing long-strand grass hay produces the broad, lateral, grinding jaw motion that wears the molar surfaces flat and even** — hours of it, every day. Pellets are chewed with a short vertical crush that takes far less time and wears the teeth unevenly. A chinchilla eating mostly pellets simply does not chew enough hours per day to keep 16 continuously growing cheek teeth in line.

This is why we are so insistent on unlimited hay. The hay isn't there to fill the cage. It's dental equipment.

Malocclusion and elongated roots

When wear doesn't keep up with growth, the teeth go wrong in two directions at once.

Above the gumline, the cheek teeth develop uneven surfaces, sharp points and **spurs** — slivers of tooth that angle outward into the cheek or inward into the tongue, cutting the soft tissue and causing ulcers. Eating becomes painful, so the animal eats less, which means even less wear, which makes the spurs worse. It is a vicious spiral and it moves faster than owners expect.

Below the gumline, the reserve crowns and roots push backward into the bone. In the lower jaw you can sometimes feel these as hard bumps along the jawline. In the upper jaw the elongating roots press up into the bony socket that holds the tear duct and the eye — which is why **a watery, weepy eye or persistent eye discharge in a chinchilla is very often a dental problem, not an eye problem**. Owners bring in an animal for a runny eye and leave with a dental diagnosis. Root elongation is also the part that can't be fully fixed; crown spurs can be filed, but roots that have grown into the bone are managed, not cured.

Early signs — catch it here

Weigh your chinchilla weekly on a kitchen scale and you will catch dental disease months earlier than an owner who doesn't. Watch for:

- **Weight loss**, often the very first measurable sign, before anything else is visible.
- **Drooling or a wet, matted chin and chest** — keepers call this "slobbers," and it is a classic chinchilla dental sign.
- **Dropping food, chewing on one side, or picking up a pellet and putting it down again** repeatedly.
- **Eating hay more slowly, or abandoning hay for pellets**, or pulling long strands out and discarding them.
- **Pawing or rubbing at the mouth or face**, excessive face washing.
- **Watery eye, tear staining down the cheek, or discharge from one eye** — think teeth first.

- **Reduced or smaller droppings**, because reduced intake shows up at the other end within a day.
- **Teeth grinding, a hunched posture, or sudden grumpiness about being touched near the face** — these are pain signals.
- **Visibly overgrown or crossed incisors**, which is a late sign; the cheek teeth usually go wrong first.

What the vet does, and what you do

Proper assessment requires sedation or anaesthesia and often skull X-rays, because the cheek teeth and roots simply cannot be seen properly in an awake chinchilla with an otoscope. Treatment is burring the crowns back to shape, trimming spurs, treating cheek and tongue ulcers, and sometimes extraction. Many chinchillas with established disease need this repeated every few months for life, alongside pain relief and sometimes assisted feeding with a herbivore critical-care formula.

Your side of the bargain is the easy part: unlimited hay, boring pellets, zero sugar, constant chew wood, a weekly weight on the scale, and an annual check that includes an oral exam. Do those six things and dental disease becomes unlikely rather than inevitable.

SECTION 8

Common Challenges & Solutions

Twelve things that actually go wrong, with what you see, why it happens, what to do, and when to pick up the phone. Two of these are genuine emergencies, and they're first for a reason.

Heat stroke — URGENT

What you see: Bright red hot ears, lying flat and stretched out, drooling, rapid or open-mouthed breathing, lethargy, staggering, collapse. Room temperature over 77°F (25°C), or lower with high humidity.

Why: The densest fur of any land mammal, no meaningful sweating, and an inability to dump heat fast enough. Body temperature climbs until organs begin to fail. This can happen in a couple of hours on a hot afternoon.

What to do: Move to a room at 60–65°F (15–18°C) immediately. Put them on a chilled granite or ceramic slab. Circulate air with a fan, not aimed directly at the animal. Dab ears and footpads with a cool damp cloth. Offer cool water. Never soak the body, never use ice water. Then go to the vet.

Call a vet: Immediately, every time, even if they look fine twenty minutes later. Heat stroke does delayed organ and neurological damage. This is an emergency visit, not a wait-and-see.

Bloat and GI stasis — URGENT

What you see: A hunched, hard, visibly distended or drum-tight belly. No droppings or very few, very small ones. Refusing all food including hay. Teeth grinding, restlessness alternating with stillness, lying stretched out, pressing the abdomen to a cool surface, laboured breathing.

Why: Fermentation gas builds in a gut that has stopped moving. Triggers include sugary or starchy food, abrupt diet change, fresh vegetables, too little hay fiber, dehydration, pain from dental disease, stress, or an obstruction from swallowed plastic or fabric.

What to do: This is an emergency. Do not attempt home remedies, do not give human gas drops without veterinary instruction, do not force-feed a bloated animal. Keep them warm but not hot, keep them quiet, and get to an exotics vet now. Bring a photo of the cage droppings if you can.

Call a vet: Immediately. **A chinchilla that has stopped eating or stopped passing droppings can die within 24–48 hours.** There is no version of this where waiting until morning is the right call.

Dental disease and malocclusion

What you see: Weight loss, slobbers, dropping food, favoring pellets over hay, pawing at the mouth, weepy eye, smaller droppings.

Why: Continuously growing teeth outpacing the wear that hay chewing provides. Usually a diet too light on hay and too heavy on pellets or treats, sometimes genetics or old jaw injury.

What to do: Book a vet appointment, don't wait for it to resolve. Meanwhile remove all treats, make hay the only easy option, and weigh weekly. Expect sedation and X-rays for proper assessment.

Call a vet: Within days of noticing any sign. Weight loss plus drooling is a this-week appointment, not a next-month one.

Fur chewing and barbering

What you see: Patches of short, chopped, uneven fur — most often on the flanks, shoulders, chest or forearms — with no bald skin showing and no crusting. Sometimes done to a cagemate rather than themselves.

Why: This is a stress and boredom behavior, and occasionally a pain behavior. Common causes: cage too small or with no height, nothing to chew, no hiding place, cage in a noisy or high-traffic spot, a dog or cat with sightlines to the cage, too much handling, an incompatible cagemate, heat stress, dental pain, or a diet with too little hay to occupy chewing time.

What to do: Treat it as a husbandry audit rather than a skin problem. Go down the list: more vertical space, more and more varied chew wood, two hideouts, a quieter and cooler location, more hay, less forced handling, a longer out-of-cage window. Rule out dental pain with a vet exam if it starts suddenly in a previously settled animal.

Call a vet: If it appears abruptly, is accompanied by weight loss, or if the skin underneath looks red, crusty or broken — then you're probably looking at fungus or pain, not boredom.

Fungal skin infection (ringworm)

What you see: Circular patches of fur loss with flaky, crusty, reddened or scabby skin, classically around the nose, eyes, ears, feet and genitals. Unlike barbering, the skin itself looks wrong.

Why: Dermatophyte fungi, often *Trichophyton* species, thriving in warm humid conditions or in a greasy coat. Driven by high humidity, insufficient dust bathing, a damp cage, overcrowding or stress-lowered immunity.

What to do: See the vet for diagnosis — several conditions look similar. Treatment is usually topical or oral antifungals, sometimes an antifungal powder mixed into the dust bath on vet instruction. Strip and replace all bedding, disinfect the cage, wash and dry wooden items thoroughly or replace them, drop the room humidity, and keep the dust bath schedule consistent.

Call a vet: Within a week of noticing. Note that ringworm is **zoonotic** — it transmits to people, especially children — so wash hands after contact and mention it to your doctor if you develop a circular rash.

Conjunctivitis and eye discharge

What you see: A watery, weepy, red or swollen eye, often just one. Tear staining down the cheek fur, or thick sticky discharge gluing the lids.

Why: Four main routes. Dust or bedding irritation (often from over-bathing or very fine bedding). A corneal scratch from hay or a cagemate. Bacterial infection. Or — very commonly — **pressure from elongated upper cheek tooth roots on the tear duct**, which is a dental problem presenting as an eye problem.

What to do: Remove the dust bath for a few days and switch to a lower-dust bedding while you observe. Gently clean discharge with sterile saline on a soft cloth, wiping away from the eye. Never use leftover eye drops from another animal or a human prescription.

Call a vet: Within 24–48 hours if it's not clearly improving, immediately if the eye is held shut, cloudy, bulging or obviously painful. Ask them to assess the teeth, not just the eye.

Diarrhea and soft stool

What you see: Droppings that are soft, misshapen, smeared, pale, unusually smelly, or outright liquid. Staining and matting around the rear.

Why: Almost always diet. Fresh fruit or vegetables, sugary treats, a sudden change of food or hay, moldy hay, too little fiber. Also antibiotics disrupting gut flora, stress, parasites such as *Giardia*, or the early phase of a serious gut infection.

What to do: Remove every treat and all fresh food immediately. Hay and water only for 24–48 hours — do not withhold hay, ever. Keep the rear end clean and dry with a dry cloth, not a wet one. Note whether they are still eating hay and still producing droppings.

Call a vet: Within 24 hours if droppings are watery, if the animal is lethargic or off food, if there's blood, or if it doesn't firm up within two days. Diarrhea dehydrates a small animal fast, and soft stool that progresses to *no* stool is turning into case #2.

Fur slip

What you see: A clean, sharply defined bald patch, usually right after handling or a fright. No blood, no crust, no irritation — just missing fur.

Why: A deliberate predator-escape reflex. The chinchilla released the fur because it was grabbed, restrained, chased, netted, or badly startled.

What to do: Nothing medical. Leave the patch alone; it will regrow over **several weeks to a few months**, sometimes in a slightly different shade at first. Review what happened: scoop rather than grab, stop chasing them around the cage, let them come to you, and give a few days of hands-off quiet. If it happened during a pair introduction, separate and restart the process more slowly.

Call a vet: Only if the skin is broken, bleeding or crusted, which means it wasn't simple fur slip.

Bite wounds from a failed pairing

What you see: Punctures or tears, commonly on ears, face, feet, flanks and tail base. Blood-matted fur, limping, a chinchilla hiding and refusing to come out, loud screeching or alarm barking, two animals wrestling, chasing or pinning rather than sitting together.

Why: An introduction moved too fast, or a previously bonded pair has fallen out over territory, a resource, hormones or the arrival of a new animal. Some chinchillas simply never accept a partner, and that is not a failure on your part.

What to do: Separate immediately and completely — not into a divided cage for now, but into two cages. Clean minor wounds with sterile saline. Puncture wounds look trivial and abscess readily under that thick fur, so they are a vet matter rather than a home matter. Do not re-introduce a pair that drew blood without a long reset, and sometimes not at all.

Call a vet: Same day for any puncture, any wound larger than a scratch, or any limping or swelling. Watch for abscesses appearing days later as firm lumps.

Overgrown nails

What you see: Long, curved nails catching on fleece, bedding, or the cage wire; an altered gait; occasionally a nail grown round into the pad.

Why: Less common in chinchillas than in some pets, because climbing on rough surfaces wears nails naturally. Shows up in older, arthritic or inactive animals, in cages with only smooth surfaces, and in chinchillas with no pumice or rough wood to work on.

What to do: Add a pumice stone, an unglazed ceramic slab and some rough-bark wood ledges — that solves most cases. If a trim is needed, use small animal nail clippers, take only the clear tip, and stay well back from the pink quick. Two people makes it far easier. If you're unsure, a vet tech will do it in two minutes.

Call a vet: If a nail has grown into the pad, is bleeding, or if the foot is swollen or sore.

Respiratory infection

What you see: Sneezing, nasal discharge, crusty nostrils, noisy or laboured breathing, wheezing, lethargy, loss of appetite, sometimes discharge from the eyes alongside.

Why: Bacterial infection, often opportunistic, taking hold in an animal stressed by heat, high humidity, poor ventilation, a dirty cage, dusty or cedar bedding, or crowding. Chinchillas have sensitive airways and irritants do real damage.

What to do: Improve the environment immediately — low-dust unscented bedding, good ventilation without drafts, clean cage, humidity under 50%, cut dust bath sessions back while symptoms persist. Then get them seen.

Call a vet: Within 24 hours of any laboured breathing or discharge, and immediately if breathing is open-mouthed or they are sitting hunched and struggling. Respiratory infections in chinchillas progress quickly and need prescription antibiotics; there is no home treatment.

Obesity

What you see: No visible waist from above, a rounded rather than athletic profile, fat rolls at the neck and shoulders, reluctance to climb or use the wheel, uneaten caecotrophs smeared in the cage, and a weight well above the animal's own baseline on your scale.

Why: Overfeeding pellets — usually a bowl topped up rather than measured — plus treats, plus a cage with no height to climb and no wheel. Mixed "gourmet" foods are a reliable route here.

What to do: Measure pellets strictly at 1 tablespoon per day, cut every treat to zero, make unlimited hay the only thing available between meals, add vertical space and a correct-sized solid wheel, and give daily out-of-cage exercise. Change weight slowly — crash restriction in a herbivore risks gut stasis and liver problems. Track weekly weights and aim for gradual loss over months.

Call a vet: If they aren't losing on a strict hay-and-measured-pellet diet, if they are reluctant to move, or if they can't reach to groom themselves and eat caecotrophs. Also ask the vet to confirm it's fat and not fluid, abdominal swelling or pregnancy.

Symptom quick-reference

What you see	Likely cause	What to do first	Vet urgency
Red hot ears, lying flat, drooling	Heat stroke	Cool room, chilled slab, fan, cool ears and feet	Emergency — now
No droppings, hard swollen belly, hunched	Bloat or GI stasis	Keep quiet and warm, no food forcing, transport	Emergency — now
Not eating at all	Dental pain, stasis, bloat, illness	Offer hay only, note droppings, go in	Emergency — now
Laboured or open-mouth breathing	Heat stress or respiratory infection	Cool, ventilate, transport	Emergency — now
Wet chin, dropping food, losing weight	Dental disease, malocclusion	Remove treats, hay only, weigh, book vet	Days
Watery or discharging eye	Dust irritation, scratch, infection, tooth root	Remove dust bath, saline clean, book vet	24–48 hours
Chopped patchy fur, skin looks normal	Fur chewing from stress or boredom	Audit cage size, chews, location, hay, handling	Only if sudden or with weight loss
Crusty flaky bald patches on face or feet	Fungal infection (ringworm)	Vet diagnosis, lower humidity, clean out cage	Within a week
Soft or liquid droppings	Diet error, moldy hay, parasites	Remove all treats and fresh food, hay and water	24 hours if watery or off food
Clean bald patch after handling	Fur slip	Leave it alone, review handling, hands-off days	Only if skin is broken
Blood, limping, screeching between two chins	Failed pairing or bite wounds	Separate into two cages, saline clean	Same day for punctures

What you see	Likely cause	What to do first	Vet urgency
Nails catching, altered gait	Overgrown nails	Add pumice and rough wood, careful tip trim	If grown into the pad
Sneezing, nasal crust, wheezing	Respiratory infection	Low-dust bedding, ventilate, clean cage	24 hours
No waist, won't climb, uneaten caecotrophs	Obesity	1 tbsp pellets, zero treats, unlimited hay, wheel	Routine, sooner if immobile

SECTION 9

Handling, Companionship & Enrichment

How to pick up a chinchilla

The principle is simple: **support the whole body, and never apply pressure to hold them in place.**

1. Let them come to you first. Open the cage, rest a hand inside, wait. A chinchilla that chooses to step onto your hand is a chinchilla that won't fur slip.
2. Slide one hand under the chest and front legs, and bring the other hand up beneath the hindquarters and rump so the animal is **sitting on your palm**, not hanging from your grip.
3. Bring them in against your chest or into the crook of your arm so they feel a solid surface on at least two sides. Height is what frightens them.
4. Keep every handling session short at first — thirty seconds is a success. Finish while it's still going well.
5. Stay low. Sit on the floor. A chinchilla dropped from standing height can break a leg or worse, and they do leap without warning.

Never: grab a handful of fur (instant fur slip), squeeze the ribcage, scruff them, hold them by the tail or restrain them by the tail base, lift them by the tail at all, chase them around the cage with a grabbing hand, or let a child carry one while walking. An older chinchilla's tail can be gently supported near the base *while the body's weight rests in your palm* — but the tail is never a handle.

Taming takes weeks, not days

Expect a month, maybe two. The sequence that works:

- **Week 1:** No handling. Sit near the cage and talk. Let them get used to your voice and smell.
- **Week 2:** Offer a plain chew stick or a strand of hay through the bars, held in your fingers. Let them take it on their terms.
- **Week 3:** Rest an open, flat hand inside the cage with a chew on it. Don't reach, don't follow them. Wait.
- **Week 4 onward:** Short lifts, as above, always ending before they want it to. Then gradually longer, in a small safe room where they can hop onto you voluntarily.

Some chinchillas become genuinely affectionate and will nap on a shoulder. Others stay friendly but never want to be held, and that is a perfectly good relationship — plenty of chinchillas prefer interaction through the cage bars and during free-roam time to being carried. Let the animal tell you which kind you have.

Companionship

Chinchillas are **social animals** that live in colonies in the wild, and most do better in a **same-sex pair** than alone, provided the pairing works. A pair grooms each other, sleeps piled up, and is far less prone to boredom-driven fur chewing. Single chinchillas can be perfectly happy *if* you provide the social contact yourself — daily interaction, out-of-cage time, a genuinely enriched cage — but that is a real daily commitment, not a theory.

Here's the honest picture on introductions:

- **Easiest:** siblings or a pair raised together from a young age. Buy a pair from the outset if you can.
- **Harder:** two unrelated adults. It can absolutely work, and it can also fail outright.
- **Never:** a male and a female unless you intend to breed, which is not a first-time-owner project. Chinchillas breed readily, pregnancy carries real risk to the female, and gestation is a long 111 days.

- **Introductions must be slow.** Quarantine any new animal for a minimum of 2–4 weeks in a separate cage in a separate room, with a vet check. Then place the two cages side by side, not touching, for a week or two so they can see and smell each other. Then a divided cage, or short supervised meetings on genuinely neutral ground — a bathroom floor neither has claimed — with a shared dust bath to mingle scent. Only then a cage both animals are new to, thoroughly cleaned, with two of everything: two hideouts with two exits each, two hay racks, two water bottles, no dead-end corners.
- **Normal:** chasing, mounting, barking, a bit of fur pulling in the first days.
- **Stop immediately:** blood, screaming, relentless pinning, one animal hiding and not eating. Separate and either reset over weeks or accept that this pair won't work.
- Expect the whole process to take **four to eight weeks**, and go in willing to keep two cages permanently.

Chewing is a daily requirement

A chinchilla must chew every day — it is how the teeth stay viable and how the brain stays occupied. Keep **three or four different safe woods** available at all times and rotate them weekly so they stay interesting: apple, willow, hazel, kiln-dried pine, aspen, grapevine, manzanita for serious gnawers. Add woven seagrass mats and balls, loofah, plain cardboard tubes stuffed with hay, and a pumice stone. Replace anything chewed down to a nub. Expect to spend a small amount on wood every month forever, and consider it the cheapest dental insurance available.

Hay-based foraging beats treats every time. A cardboard tube packed with timothy and a dried rose hip buried in the middle will occupy a chinchilla far longer, and far more healthily, than anything from the treat aisle.

Out-of-cage time in a chinchilla-proofed room

Daily free-roam time of **30–60 minutes** in a safe room is wonderful for a chinchilla — real running, real climbing, real leaps. It is also the single most dangerous hour of their day if the room isn't prepared. Chinchilla-proofing means, genuinely, all of this:

- **Every electrical cable** unplugged, removed, or inside rigid conduit. An electrocution is a dead chinchilla, and they go for cables first.
- **No gaps.** Behind and under furniture, inside recliners and sofa frames, behind appliances, under doors, inside heating vents, up a chimney. Block them physically. A chinchilla squeezes through startlingly small spaces and then can't get out.
- **Nothing toxic or chewable at ground level:** houseplants (many are poisonous), books, skirting boards, wallpaper, carpet edges, curtain hems, painted or varnished furniture, foam, fabric, wires, plastic of any kind.
- **No water.** No open toilet, no filled sink, no pet water bowl, no bucket. A wet chinchilla is a serious problem and a drowning risk.
- **No other pets in the room.** Not dogs, not cats, not even "friendly" ones.
- **Doors and windows closed**, and everyone in the house told the chinchilla is out.
- **You in the room, watching**, the entire time. Not in the next room.
- **A way to end it calmly** — a carrier or the open cage with a fresh chew in it, so you aren't chasing them at bedtime. Most chinchillas will hop back in for a hay treat once they learn the routine.

A moderately sized bathroom with the toilet lid down and the cables gone is often the easiest room in the house to make genuinely safe.

SECTION 10

Routine Care Calendar

Frequency	Task
Daily	Check room temperature and humidity at cage height, at the warmest point of the day
Daily	Refill loose grass hay to a generous full pile
Daily	Measure out 1–2 tbsp of plain pellets; remove any uneaten from yesterday
Daily	Change water and check the bottle's ball bearing moves freely
Daily	Scoop the litter corner and spot-clean shelves
Daily	Count droppings by eye — volume and firmness consistent with yesterday
Daily	Watch appetite, posture, breathing and activity for 2 minutes
Daily	Supervised out-of-cage time, 30–60 minutes, in a proofed room
Daily	Confirm chew wood is present and not chewed to nothing
2–4 times weekly	Dust bath, 10–15 minutes, then remove
Weekly	Weigh on a kitchen scale and write the number down
Weekly	Full bedding change; wash and dry the tray
Weekly	Scrub the water bottle and sipper tube with a bottle brush
Weekly	Rotate and replace chew toys; check wooden shelves for soiling or damage
Weekly	Sift droppings out of the dust; top up dust
Weekly	Hands-on check: ears, eyes, nose, teeth if they'll allow, feet, rear end, coat condition
Monthly	Deep clean the whole cage — wipe bars, shelves and base with mild unscented soap or vinegar solution, dry fully
Monthly	Replace the dust entirely
Monthly	Inspect the cage for chewed plastic, loose wire, worn shelves, failing wheel bearings
Monthly	Check nail length and pumice availability
Monthly	Review the weight log for a trend, not just a number
Seasonally	Reassess cage location for summer heat and winter drafts; test A/C or fan before the first hot week
Seasonally	Buy fresh hay; check stored hay for mold or musty smell
Annually	Wellness exam with an exotics vet, including an oral and dental assessment
Annually	Replace well-chewed shelves and ledges; re-evaluate cage size and layout
Annually	Review your emergency plan: vet numbers, after-hours clinic, carrier, power-outage cooling plan

SECTION 11

When to See a Vet

Chinchillas are prey animals and they hide illness until they can't. By the time something is obvious, it is usually well established — which is why the weekly weight and the daily two-minute watch matter so much. Find an exotics vet *before* you need one; a general small-animal practice may not have chinchilla experience or the right anaesthetic protocols.

Go today — this is an emergency:

- **Not eating, or not passing droppings.** A chinchilla's gut must keep moving. **No food or no droppings for 12 hours is an emergency and can be fatal within 24–48 hours.** This is the single most important line in this guide after the heat warning.
- **Signs of heat stroke** — red hot ears, lying flat, drooling, collapse — even if they seem to recover.
- **A hard, swollen, drum-tight abdomen,** hunched posture, teeth grinding.
- **Laboured, open-mouthed or noisy breathing.**
- **Seizures, head tilt, circling, loss of balance, or unresponsiveness.**
- **Bleeding that doesn't stop,** or any deep wound or suspected fracture.
- **Straining with no urine or droppings produced.**
- **Watery diarrhea,** particularly with lethargy.
- **A sudden drop in weight,** or any animal too weak to sit up normally.
- **Prolapse of any kind,** or a female in difficulty giving birth.

Call within 24–48 hours:

- Eating less, or eating pellets but refusing hay.
- Drooling or a persistently wet chin.
- Weight loss across two weekly weigh-ins.
- Eye discharge, a closed or cloudy eye.
- Nasal discharge, sneezing, crusty nostrils.
- Soft or misshapen droppings that haven't firmed up in 48 hours.
- Limping, swelling, a lump, or a bitten patch.
- Crusty, flaky or bald skin, especially on the face and feet.
- A sudden change in temperament, hiding, or a drop in activity.
- Head shaking or persistent scratching at one ear.

Routine, but don't skip it: an annual wellness and dental exam for every chinchilla, moving to twice yearly from about eight years old or for any animal with a dental history.

When you go, bring useful information: your weight log, a note of what they're eating and how much, how long symptoms have been present, and a photo of the droppings and the cage. It genuinely changes the quality of the appointment.

SECTION 12

FAQ

What temperature is safe for a chinchilla?

Aim for **60–70°F (15–21°C)** with humidity under 50%. Up to about 75°F (24°C) is tolerable with good airflow and a cooling slab, but **above 77°F (25°C) your chinchilla is at real risk of heat stroke**, and above 80°F (27°C) it is a genuine emergency. Humidity compounds everything — a useful rule is to keep temperature in °F plus humidity percentage under 150. Cold is rarely the problem; chinchillas are mountain animals and are comfortable down into the 50s°F.

What do chinchillas eat?

Unlimited loose grass hay — timothy or orchard grass — plus **1–2 tablespoons of a plain, uniform, high-fiber pellet per day** and fresh water. That really is the whole diet. Hay should make up the overwhelming majority of what they actually consume, because it's both their fiber source and the only thing that properly wears down their continuously growing teeth. Skip anything with seeds, fruit, nuts, corn or colorful pieces, however appealing the bag looks.

Can chinchillas eat fruit?

No. Not apple, not banana, not berries, and absolutely not raisins or dried fruit, despite how often those are sold as chinchilla treats. Chinchillas have a very limited ability to handle sugar — it feeds the wrong gut bacteria and causes gas, bloat and diarrhea, and soft sweet food gives the teeth none of the grinding they need. If you want to give something special, use one or two plain dried rose hips or a pinch of dried chamomile or dandelion leaf instead.

How big should a chinchilla cage be?

Think tall, not wide. The absolute minimum for one chinchilla is about **24 x 24 inches of floor space and 48 inches tall (61 x 61 x 122 cm)** with at least three solid levels, and we'd honestly recommend 36 x 24 x 60 inches (91 x 61 x 152 cm). For a bonded pair, go to 48 inches wide and 72 inches tall if you can. Bar spacing should be no more than 1 inch, all shelves and the wheel must be solid rather than wire, and avoid plastic anywhere in the enclosure because they will eat it.

How often do chinchillas need a dust bath?

Two to four times a week, for 10–15 minutes each time, then take the bath out of the cage. Use chinchilla dust rather than sand, at a depth of 2–3 inches. Never leave the bath in permanently — it becomes a litter box, the animal over-bathes and ends up with dry irritated skin and weepy eyes, and the airborne dust bothers their airways. Increase to three or four sessions in humid summer weather and drop back to two in dry winter air.

How long do chinchillas live?

10–20 years, with most pet chinchillas living 12–15 years in good care. That is a serious long-term commitment — longer than many dogs — and it includes a decade and a half of summer temperature control, hay in the house, and veterinary care that gets more involved as they age. Please plan for the whole fifteen years before bringing one home, including who will care for them if your circumstances change.

Can chinchillas live alone?

Yes, but it takes real effort from you. Chinchillas are naturally colonial and most do better in a **same-sex pair**, which reduces boredom-driven problems like fur chewing. A single chinchilla can be perfectly content if you provide daily interaction, daily out-of-cage time, and a genuinely enriched cage with plenty to chew. Never house a male and female together unless you intend to breed, and introduce any two adults very slowly over four to eight weeks — some pairings simply fail.

Why is my chinchilla chewing its fur?

Fur chewing, or barbering, is almost always a **stress or boredom signal** rather than a skin disease — look for chopped uneven patches with normal-looking skin underneath. Work through the causes: cage too small or lacking height, not enough chew wood, no hideout, a noisy or too-warm location, a dog or cat in sightline, too much handling, an unhappy cagemate, or not enough hay to occupy chewing time. If it starts suddenly in a settled animal, or the skin looks crusty or red, see a vet — that can mean dental pain or a fungal infection instead.

Can you bathe a chinchilla in water?

No — never. That extraordinarily dense coat soaks up water and will not dry for many hours, which leaves the animal chilled and creates warm damp conditions at the skin where fungal infection takes hold. Dust is how chinchillas clean themselves, and it works beautifully. If something sticky gets on the coat, spot-clean with a barely damp cloth on that small area only and dry it thoroughly, or ask your vet.

Why is my chinchilla not eating?

Treat this as an emergency. A chinchilla that stops eating, or stops passing normal droppings, can deteriorate within **24–48 hours** because their gut has to keep moving constantly. The most common causes are dental pain, bloat or gut stasis, heat stress and systemic illness — none of which resolve on their own. Offer hay, note when you last saw normal droppings, and call an exotics vet or an after-hours emergency clinic today rather than waiting until morning.

***Ready to shop?** Start with Critters!. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters. Not sure this is the right pet? Compare your options in our Small Animal Guide.*

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a single dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not after costs, not at the end of a good quarter, not as a seasonal promotion — front-loaded, every order, all year. The shelters doing this work are usually small, usually stretched thin, and usually staffed by people who show up at 6am to clean kennels before their paying job. We think they deserve a cut of what we do.

It matters to us for chinchillas in particular. Chinchillas are surrendered more often than most people realize, usually by families who were told they were easy starter pets and then discovered a fifteen-year, air-conditioned, hay-everywhere, don't-touch-the-fur commitment. Every owner who reads a guide like this one and goes in with clear eyes is one less chinchilla in a rescue. That's genuinely why we write these.

So thank you — for doing the homework, for buying the cooling slab before you needed it, for choosing the boring pellet over the colorful bag, and for giving one small, soft, slightly absurd mountain animal a very good life.

From our family in Christiana, Lancaster County, to yours and your critters — welcome to the Best Life Family! If you get stuck, send us a note or give us a call. We're real people, we've kept these animals, and we'd much rather answer a question today than hear about a problem next month.

Walnut Creek Supply — clean fuel, no junk. No mystery ingredients, ever.