

# Chinchilla

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Long-tailed chinchillas, *Chinchilla lanigera*, are best known for their silky, soft fur. But it is the large size of their expressive eyes and attentive ears, in contrast to their small bodies, that make chinchillas one of the world's most recognizable animals. These nocturnal pets are curious, love to climb and jump, and chew on almost everything they encounter. Unlike humans, who have one or two hairs per hair follicle, chinchillas have up to 60 hairs per follicle. But despite the thick, soft fur this trait creates, it takes a lot of interaction and patience before a chinchilla will bond with his human companion and allow himself to be picked up and petted. For adults willing to overcome this challenge, however, a chinchilla can be a wonderful, lifelong pet.

## INTERESTING FACTS

**Characteristics:** Also known in some parts of the world as "rabbit mice," chinchillas are members of the rodent family and related to guinea pigs, rats, mice, squirrels, beavers, and porcupines. Depending on their mood, chinchillas communicate through a series of chirps, peeps, and cackles. The body of an adult chinchilla measures between 10 and 14 inches, with a 6 to 8 inch long tail. The average adult weighs between 1 and 1-1/2 pounds. They are usually kept singly. If housing more than one, a much larger cage is needed. Unspayed females tend to be territorial. The average captive life span of a chinchilla is 15 years, though with proper care they can live up to 22 years.

**Appearance:** Chinchillas have tiny bodies and heads with big eyes and ears, long whiskers, and a bushy, squirrel-like tail. Their thick, soft fur requires frequent dust baths to keep it luxurious. In captivity, chinchillas have been bred for a number of attractive color variations. The most common fur color, light to dark gray, is known as piebald. Other variations include white, silver, black, black velvet, beige, brown, brown velvet, sapphire, violet, gold, and a few mixed combinations of each color. Most color variations have a lighter colored underbody and one of three distinct eye colors: black, light red, or dark red. They are known to grasp food with their small forepaws and stand on their hind legs when investigating something new.

**#1 Preventable Health Problem:** Like all rodents, a chinchilla's front upper incisors continually grow throughout the animal's lifetime. Therefore, [Timothy Hay](#)

is essential to keep your chinchilla's teeth clean and worn as are proper chew [toys](#) and [treats](#). In addition, chinchillas have very sensitive stomachs, and if they are overfed, fed damp or moldy hay, are not provided enough grass hay, or not exercised enough, diarrhea or constipation can occur. Because of a chinchilla's large eyes, they are also susceptible to eye injury and extra caution is needed to ensure their cage is free from sharp edges. Due to their thick fur, they are very susceptible to overheating, and should be kept in an environment of 50-65°F, with less than 50% humidity.

**Preferences:** Because chinchillas are nocturnal and require a fairly rigid daily routine of sleeping, exercising, and feeding, it is essential that they are protected from any daytime noises. A chinchilla may become stressed by changes to their routine. When not sleeping, chinchillas are very active and playful. Because of this - in addition to their jumping ability - they need a [cage](#) that is roomy and filled with various climbing shelves and [hiding spots](#).

**Best Features:** A Chinchilla's best features include looks, activity, and its long life span.

**Housing:** Native to the high altitudes (16,500 feet) of the Andes Mountains of South America, chinchillas have unique housing requirements. Their natural environment is filled with fissures and ledges in rocks and caves, surrounded by sparse, though thorny, vegetation. This environment has made chinchillas very adept at climbing, jumping, and darting into secure hiding spots when frightened or to sleep. As such, a chinchilla should be housed in a [cage](#) that offers numerous climbing ledges and at least one sleeping [den](#). Multilevel cages are the best. Because a chinchilla needs enough room to exercise, explore, and climb, chosen cages should be at least 24" wide x 24" long x 24" high (a 6 ft x 6 ft x 3 ft cage is ideal). Use [bedding](#) in solid bottom cages and provide a board or structure in part of the floor if the floor is wire mesh. They also need a suitable [water bottle](#). An [exercise wheel](#) will also help your chinchilla expend some of his energy.

Chinchillas relish and need frequent [sand baths](#). These rolling romps in specially designed [sand](#) helps keep your chinchilla's thick fur smooth and silky. It is also believed these sand baths help chinchillas relax and relieve stress.

Because chinchillas may become startled easily - especially during the day when they are trying to sleep - consider placing your chosen cage with at least one side against a solid wall, or in a corner. The cage should also be located in a well-lighted location out of direct sunlight and any drafts. In addition, since their natural mountain habitat experiences little humidity with vast daily temperature changes, chinchillas are more suited to room temperatures between 50-65°F with a relative humidity of less than 50%. Chinchillas also benefit from time spent exploring outside the cage. Because chinchillas will chew anything they find and may run if you try to catch them, adding an [exercise pen](#) to your pet's environment is beneficial.

**Diet:** In the wild, chinchillas eat grasses and some types of cacti. Their natural diet is adapted to large quantities of roughage. In captivity, chinchillas need a balanced [diet](#) of mostly [Timothy Hay](#), some chinchilla-specific pellets, and water. Suitable treats include small pieces of fresh fruits, single raisins, and chinchilla-specific treats. However, chinchillas prefer snacks to their normal diet, so offer your chinchilla limited quantities of treats. Snacks should be less than 10% of the total amount of food he eats per day. Instead, ensure your pet has unlimited quantities of Timothy Hay.