



Chinchillas are an intelligent, agile, and relatively small rodent that is native to the dry and high altitudes of Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Chile. They typically live between 10–15 years, although an especially healthy chin can live up to 20+ years. In the wild, they live in large colonies and make their homes in rocky mountain crevices. Domestic chinchillas however, are strictly indoor pets. On average, a chinchilla weighs between 400-600 grams (not exceeding 700 grams) once fully grown. Females are usually larger than males. Chinchillas are named in a similar manner to other mammals, with does (females), bucks (males), and kits (babies).

## Living Space

Chinchillas (Chins) are very active and spend the majority of their lifespan in their cage. It should be **large with many levels, perches, ramps, and places to hide** to fulfill all their natural climbing & nesting instincts. The **absolute minimum** cage size cited by chinchilla experts is approximately **0.6m x 0.6m by 0.8m**. While this is the minimum acceptable size, the general rule for new chin owners is to buy the biggest cage you can afford that will fit in your house. Opt for a tall, wire cage with a solid bottom & shelves.

**Avoid glass tanks & cages designed for birds** altogether as they are not suitable for chinchillas. Any cage you buy for your chin should be specifically designed for chinchillas. A large, chinchilla-appropriate cage may be an expensive purchase, but it is well worth the price in health benefits & quality of life for your pet.

## Dietary Needs

Domestic chinchillas are strict herbivores, eating only plant-based foods. Due to the design of a chinchilla's specialized herbivore digestive tract,

they must have **constant access to food and grass**. Having a food-restricted feeding method (ie. feeding small amounts at certain times of the day) can have an ill effect on your pet chinchilla. It is always recommended to keep your pet's food, water and grass containers full at all times. A chinchilla will not overeat their pellets or grass to the point of becoming obese, as long as the food being offered is of high-quality.

**Grass-based chinchilla-formulated pellets** and a **variety of hays** should be offered daily with **unlimited free Timothy Hay** making up the bulk of their diet. **Oxbow Essentials Chinchilla pellets** are the recommended food pellet of choice for their nutritional value and uniform pellet design. Avoid pellets that have "treats" included. These pellet mixes are usually less nutrient dense and promote a chin to selective eating which cause illness and obesity. Your chin will eat **between 1 to 2 tablespoons of pellets a day**, depending on their age and metabolism. Your chin should eat at minimum **a pile of hay** that is the same size as their body daily.

Always ensure your chin has access to **fresh drinking water**. While chinchillas do not normally drink large amounts of water (an adaptation to dry climates) they should always have access to a full water bottle. Ensure your chin's water bottle does in fact drain water by pressing on the ball a few times after every clean and refill

### A healthy Chinchilla diet should contain:

Grass Hays (Timothy)	80-90% of total intake
Fortified Pellets	10-18% of total intake
Treats	2% of total intake
with unlimited fresh water	



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## Treats

Treats can be offered sparingly (approx. **2% of total diet**) if they are nutrient dense, dried, and plant-based. Some **favourite treats** for chinchillas include sweet hays, rose hips (high in vitamin C), mountain ash berries, dandelion, and various dried leaves among others.

**Never offer** your chin meat, fish, dairy, fruits with a high water content, fruits that contain a pit, citrus or acidic fruits (including tomatoes), vegetables or corn. All of these are too hard on a chinchilla's sensitive digestive tract and **can be dangerous**. Carrots may occasionally be offered.

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## Chews

As rodent's teeth grow, they need to be constantly trimmed down. Providing roughage-like hays in their diet is only half of the solution to keeping a rodent's teeth healthy. **Wood, pumice, or calcium-based chews** offer extra teeth trimming and cure cage boredom in between free run time. Woods that are safe to offer include **fruit tree woods, willow, and dogwood**.

**Never offer** wood that comes from a tree that bears fruit containing a pit (plum, peach, cherry, etc.) or wood containing sap (pine, etc). Also ensure the wood is pesticide and insecticide free if locally sourced. **Never offer** salt chews or licks. Unlike other rodents, chinchillas do not need a salt supplement.

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## Exercise

Chinchillas need ample exercise to maintain their health. Not only does this keep them physically fit and deter illness, but it also provides mental stimulation and creates an opportunity to bond with their human. The best way to provide exercise is to regularly provide free run time in a designated room for a few hours each day. **"Chin-proofing"** must be done to any room the chin will run in.

Lack of hay can lead to malocclusion, a misalignment of the teeth that may require surgical correction, and GI Stasis, shutting down of the digestive tract often leading to death.

### CHIN-PROOFING 101

1. The first step in "chin-proofing" means getting on your hands and knees (and even belly) and looking for **safety hazards** from floor level, and upwards. **Electrical wires** or **dangling cords** from curtains or blinds can be a safety hazard if chewed on. **Baseboards** or even **cracks in drywall** can become an undeniable and unhealthy new "toy" for a free roaming chin. Offer lots of chinchilla-appropriate and creative toys during free run time to deter a chin's curiosity in chewing your house or furniture!
2. The next step to "chin-proofing" requires you to **make a tight fist** and try to see **where you can fit it behind and between furniture** from all levels in the room. Chins have flexible rib cages. If their head can fit into a space, so can the rest of the body! This could lead to your chin getting trapped or injured while trying to explore small spaces. Also be mindful that chins can easily **jump 2 metres or more** up to objects/furniture. Just because you think something is out of reach, does not mean it is!

Chinchilla free run time **should always be supervised**, with no small children or other pets present in the room. Most chin parents pick a hallway or bathroom for free run time if there are no spare bedrooms available. The benefit of using a bathroom being easy clean-up and a general lack of electronics to unplug and put safely away. Any room you can safely "chin-proof" will do. If your chosen free run room has floor vents, a towel can be laid over to protect your chin's paws. Use caution when choosing a room that contains the front or back door to your house. It's better to **lock doors** so your chin does not escape should someone open the door from the outside!



An **exercise wheel** can be a valuable addition to your pet's home, provided it is **mounted securely** and the **running surface is a solid flat surface/free from wire**. Wire wheels pose a high risk to the delicate feet of chins. Any wheel introduced to a chin's cage should be **thoroughly and regularly inspected** for safety concerns and removed immediately if unsatisfactory, or if the chin's mobility changes (becomes ill/injured).

**Exercise balls however, should absolutely NEVER be used for chinchillas.** While it may be tempting to allow your chin to run around the house in a ball instead of free running, exercise balls **damage the skeletal structure** of chinchillas and pose a risk of **poor ventilation** and **overheating** during exercise. The safest way to exercise your chin is to provide free run time in a chin-proofed room.

Unlike rabbits or other small pets, chinchillas **cannot be litter trained**. Luckily their poops are dry and firm which makes for easy sweeping or vacuuming. While chinchillas will poop everywhere they travel, they often will pick one spot/corner inside their cage where they will pee. Since they don't drink large amounts of water, they will pee infrequent and small amounts. While out running, a chinchilla may return to their cage to pee (as long as they have access to their cage), or they may pick a corner in their free run room to pee in. Watch and anticipate areas where they may pee to protect your flooring if a tiled or hardwood floor room is not available!

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## Sleep

Often chins will most be active during evening and morning (aka Crepuscular). Ideally offer free runs during this period. As chins are prey animals, they enjoy having multiple hides in which to eat, chew and sleep while being comfortably hidden from prying eyes. Always have a hide readily available during all hours, even during runs, that they can retreat to in order to feel secure. During the day, they will often sleep in their favourite hide. They will wake to eat and drink occasionally. Try to offer

quiet during their sleep hours so that they will feel rested enough to play outside their cage later during their wakeful hours!

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## Handling

While chinchillas appear very cute and cuddly, they are not appropriate pets for children due to their fragile bone structure and general shyness from unsolicited physical contact. Even older teenagers and adults need to be ever mindful of their pet's delicate nature.

Handle a chinchilla as you would handle a bird; **gently scoop them up from the bottom (holding their bum and hind feet)** and allow them to **perch on you** with ample extra space to wiggle free if they become too warm. If handling is required for veterinary care or exam, a more secure (but still gentle) hold will be required.

Never pick a chinchilla up by their tail. Never squeeze a chinchilla around their ribs. A chin that is frightened or handled too rough will release a clump of their hair known as "fur-slip" or "fur-blow". A fur slip is a defensive mechanism from predators in the wild!

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## Grooming

Chinchillas have very dense fur, an estimated ~50 hairs per one hair follicle. In comparison, humans have only one hair per hair follicle! This is what gives chinnies their famous soft coats. Because of these dense coats, chinchillas generally **do not take baths in water**. Any water or moisture (humidity) trapped in their fur over a long period of time could cause mold or fungus to grow and the chin could become sick. **Specially-formulated chinchilla dust** and **their two front paws** is all your chin should ever need to groom themselves. Offer your chin a **dust bath at least a few times a week** depending on the humidity – increase bathing during hotter, more humid months like summer and decrease during drier, colder months like winter. Monitor your chin's coat for effectiveness. On a healthy chin, each hair should be visible from other



hairs. Clumped, oily, or rigid-looking fur requires dust.

While water should never be needed for bathing in a healthy, well-looked after chin, some chins can be messy drinkers and accidents do happen. If your pet chinchilla should ever accidentally get wet, don't panic! Pat them dry with a towel, blow-dry them on the cool setting, and offer a dust bath afterwards. Water will not harm a chin as long as they are dried off quickly and thoroughly. Under rare circumstances, some chinchillas have even been bathed in water by experienced owners and veterinary staff. If this is ever required for your chin, your vet will let know how to proceed.

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## Ailments & Illnesses

**MALOCCLUSION (AKA THE SLOBBERS):** This is a **life-threatening dental disease**. A rodent's teeth constantly grow, and need to be worn down regularly to keep the chin healthy. If their teeth are not worn down or are misaligned, the teeth will continue to grow regardless, sometimes upwards or sideways into the soft palate and gums, which can cause painful ulcerations to develop. **Signs and symptoms include** watery eyes on one or both sides of the face, drooling, pawing at the mouth, an inability or difficulty eating or drinking, loss of appetite and weight loss. If caught by a vet, the teeth can be ground down before causing more damage or death.

**RESPIRATORY ILLNESS:** Can range from the common cold, to much more severe illnesses, such as pneumonia. **Signs and symptoms include** coughing, sneezing, discharge from the eyes or nose and lethargy. Always keep a dry environment for your chin. Ideal humidity is between **40%-60% or less**. Opt for **paper bedding** (never use wood shavings as these can cause respiratory illness) and **remove wet bedding daily**. Chin urine is very concentrated and can cause respiratory illness if left to build up. As well, **avoid household air fresheners** (ie. Febreze, smelly candles, etc.) as these can

irritate a chin's lungs. If you suspect your chin is suffering from a respiratory illness, immediately take them to a vet for further evaluation.

**HEATSTROKE:** Chins are **very sensitive to heat**. Their ideal environment should typically be between **18-21 degrees Celsius (65-70F)**, and should never exceed 26 Celsius (79F). Avoid placing your chin's enclosure in direct sunlight or near a humidity-producing room (ie. kitchen, bathroom, laundry room). **Heat and humidity** in combination are particularly **fatal** for chins. Provide a consistently **cool, dry environment** for your chin that is **free from drafts or excessive air flow** (ie. fan, a/c unit). **Signs and symptoms** to watch for include finding your chin stretched out with laboured breathing, red (not pink) ears, and your chin feeling warm to touch. Immediately remove your chin to a cooler area and turn a fan on in the room (do not allow the air to blow directly on your chin). Applying a cool cloth to the armpits, groin and neck, or providing access to a "chin-chiller" marble stone can dramatically reduce your chins temperature quickly. Consult your vet afterwards for follow-up care.

**GI STASIS:** In a healthy chin, their stomach and intestines are constantly moving. The food they eat is low in calories, and as such, must be constantly moving to make room for more food to be digested. GI Stasis occurs when the muscular contractions that push food through the gut either slow down or stop altogether. This causes an imbalance of bacteria in their gut and for food to become dehydrated while en route (can lead to an obstruction of the GI tract). **Signs and symptoms include** reduced intake, decreased activity, lethargy, abdominal stretching/distension, hunched posture, behaviour changes, and mostly importantly changes in the appearance of or lack of poops altogether.

**BLOAT:** A chinchilla's digestive tract is not designed to manage the buildup of gas from digesting certain foods (ie. vegetables). When gas does build up from inappropriate foods or treats, it can potentially be **life-threatening**



as the chin is not able to expel it effectively. This requires **immediate emergency veterinary care** as it can lead to rupture of the stomach or intestines. You should regularly and gently feel your pet's tummy for "distension" or fullness. A happy chin tummy should be muscular but soft and pain-free when gently pressed.

**GI AND INTERNAL PARASITES:** While a chinchilla's fur is too dense for fleas, ticks or mites to penetrate, chinchillas are still susceptible to internal parasites and infection. Examples include **giardia, coccidian, cryptosporidium, and various worms**. If you suspect an internal parasite or infection based on your chins poops, take them to a vet for further evaluation. A sample will be required for analysis.

**BROKEN BONES:** This is an emergency situation requiring **immediate veterinary attention and care**. If caught early, a simple splint, cast, or minor surgery to pin the joint will suffice. Your chin will be outfitted with a collar so they do not chew the cast or bandages while they heal for the next 3 weeks. If a broken bone goes undetected or untreated, it is not uncommon for amputation to be required, which involves the entire limb being permanently removed via surgery. Monitor your chinchilla for **signs of injury** such as: having had an awkward fall, falling from a high place, pain, guarding/favouring one limb, immobility, or behaviour changes.

**BUMBLEFOOT:** Chinchillas have very sensitive feet. Combined with hard floors and a naturally dry environment and this can lead to **thick callouses** forming on the bottoms and sides of their hind paw pads. If their feet become too neglected, the callouses can crack and bleed and develop into abscesses which increase your pet's risk of infection. It is always recommended to allow your chin to **run on softer surfaces** to protect their paw pads. If carpet isn't an option, using old towels, blankets and lining their cage shelves with plush cloth (all of which can be washed) can be a viable alternative. Monitor your chin to make sure they don't try to tear

or eat the fabric. If you notice your chin's feet becoming dry or calloused, talk to your vet about options to reduce and reverse the effects on your pet's paws. Sometimes chinchilla-safe paw cream or oils can be used.

**FUR-CHEWING:** It is not known why some chinchillas chew their fur. It may be **hereditary** (i.e. learned behaviour from a parent), due to an **environmental stressor** (i.e. too much light/noise), **anxiety, boredom**, or some **other unknown factor**. Fur-chewing is often noted by areas of shorter fur, usually on the hind-quarters (where a chin can reach around) where the fur appears a shorter length than the rest of the body. While it's not harmful for a chin to overgroom themselves, it is something to watch for as an indicator of your chinchilla's mental health and happiness. Ensure your chin has everything they need to feel secure and happy (food, water, a safe place to hide, quiet while they sleep, chews, and social interaction from their human).

### **Always remember:**

Chinchillas are prey animals and thus very good at hiding when they are ill. **Take your chin to a vet** at the first sign of illness and **regularly for checkups**. If you wait for an illness to become more obvious, it may be too late.

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## Miscellaneous Facts

- Chinchillas are **considered hypoallergenic** due to their dense fur and lack of dander. Humans who are allergic to other pets, generally find they are more tolerant of chinchillas. However, a human **may still be allergic to the dust, hay, or urine of a chinchilla**.
- The Chinese word for chinchilla means "dragon cat".
- Like cats, chinchillas use their whiskers to help them find their way around.
- Chinchillas see better in low light and are generally near sighted (objects that are far away appear blurry).



- Chinchillas have been proven to not only be able to learn human languages, but also the languages of other animals.
- Former PM of Canada, Stephen Harper and his wife Laureen Harper, had a pet chinchilla. His name was Charlie and he debuted on their 2013 Happy Holidays card.
- The most common fur colour by far is Standard Gray, which is the natural coat colour of chinchillas in the wild. All other fur colours are mutations originating from decades of selective breeding.
- While chins generally pee in the same places, they poop whenever and wherever. Their poops are very nutritious as compost for gardens!
- A chinchilla winking at you is no cause for concern. It is their way of saying “hello“! Wink back and see how long you two can keep the winking game going!

## Useful Websites and Books

The following websites are some of for taking care of your chinchilla!

**Love My Chinchilla** [lovemychinchilla.com](http://lovemychinchilla.com)

**The Spruce Pets** [thesprucepets.com](http://thesprucepets.com)

**Oxbow Animal Health** [oxbowanimalhealth.com](http://oxbowanimalhealth.com)

**Pet MD** [petmd.com](http://petmd.com)

**Canadian Chinchilla Rescue**  
[canadianchinchillarescue.webs.com](http://canadianchinchillarescue.webs.com)

**Flower Town Chinchillas\*** [chinchilla.ca](http://chinchilla.ca)

*\*Canadian-owned chinchilla supplies store (for bulk rosehips among other specialty treats)*

The following books are available at Chapters:

**Ultimate Chinchilla Care** (2013),  
by Thomas Layton

**Chinchillas: A Guide to Caring for Your Chinchilla**  
(2008), by Donna Anastasi

**If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us!**

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