

The chinchilla is a hystricomorphic rodent, closely related to the guinea pig and porcupine. They are native to the Andes Mountain areas of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. In the wild state, they live at high altitudes in rocky, barren mountainous regions. They have been bred in captivity since 1923 primarily for their pelts. Some chinchillas fortunate enough to have substandard furs were sold as pets or research animals. Today chinchillas are still raised for pelts, pelts and research.

Chinchillas are fairly clean, odorless, and friendly pets, but they are usually shy and easily frightened. They do not make very good pets for young children, since they tend to be high strung and hyperactive. The fur is extremely soft and beautiful bluish gray in color, thus leading to their popularity in the pelt industry. Current color mutations include white, silver, beige, and black.

### **Habitat**

Chinchillas must be kept in an area that has good lighting, adequate ventilation, and cool, dry air. They do not tolerate heat or humidity, and they thrive at lower temperatures. The optimal temperature is 60° to 70°F. Wire mesh cages are typically used for chinchillas, with or without a solid floor. Glass aquariums or plastic containers can be used, but with caution due to their poor ventilation. Wooden cages should not be used since chinchillas are known for gnawing. These animals tend to be very active and acrobatic, thus requiring a lot of space. An ideal enclosure would measure at least 6 ft X 6 ft X 3 ft with a one foot square nest box. Dust baths should be provided at least once or twice weekly. These must be large and deep enough to allow the chinchilla to roll over in it. Finely powdered volcanic ash is marketed as chinchilla dust, which is used to keep the fur clean and well groomed.

### **Breeding**

Chinchillas generally do not get along well when housed together, with the female being the more aggressive gender. Breeders and pelters commonly set up polygamous colonies with one male having access to five or so females maintained in separate cages. The male has a tunnel along the back of the females cages which enables him to enter any cage at will. The females cannot pass through the tunnel because they are fitted with lightweight collars that are just a little wider than the cage opening.

### **Nutrition**

The nutritional requirements of the chinchilla are similar to the guinea pig. Commercial chinchilla pellets are available. When the chinchilla variety is not in stock, a standard rabbit or guinea pig pellet can be offered. Chinchillas tend to eat with their hands and often throw out a

lot of pellets resulting in wastage. A pelleted formulation should always be available. Timothy, or other grass hay, should be fed to chinchillas in addition to their pellets. Alfalfa hay is not recommended due to its high calcium content relative to phosphorus. Hay is critical for both nutritional and psychological reasons. Grass hay provides fiber to the diet while serving as an item for the pet to chew rather than its fur. Fresh carrots and greens can also be provided as treats and another source of fiber. Dried fruit and nuts are acceptable treats for the pet chinchilla. Raisins tend to be a favorite. Chinchillas can be provided fresh water from sipper-type bottles.