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Chinchillas

Chinchillas can be fun and unique pets; but there are special considerations in caring for these fascinating creatures that the new owner needs to be aware of before their purchase. Chinchillas can live anywhere from 10-20 years and need an adequate amount of space and amenities. They are herbivorous rodents similar to guinea pigs & rabbits; but in order for chinchillas to remain healthy, they have specific dietary requirements.

HISTORY:

Wild chinchillas originated from the Andes Mountains of South America and are now considered extinct in their natural habitat. Chinchilla fur is very dense (up to 90 hairs per follicle), and their pelts were highly sought after in the early 1900's. Thirteen animals were brought to the U.S. in the 1920's and the majority of captive chinchillas today are the descendents. Besides being kept as pets, chinchillas now are also used in medical research for their hearing, because it is so similar to ours.

BIOLOGY:

Chinchillas weigh a little over one pound, with females being slightly larger than males. The normal color is a blue-gray, but variations throughout the color spectrum are bred, with black being the most sought after.

Chinchillas are born with one set of teeth for their entire life. Their teeth pattern is typical of most rodents--two top/two bottom incisors and 16 molar/premolar teeth. These grow throughout their life, at a rate of close to three inches a year.

Just like rabbits, chinchillas need to ingest their softer, nutrient-rich night feces (cecatrophs) to obtain important vitamins. It is very important to closely monitor the feces of a chinchilla. Their

feces should be formed and moist. Fecal pellets that are dry and small are typically a sign of gastrointestinal disease or dehydration.

Females have four nipples, while males do not have a scrotum--thus the testes are kept in the abdomen. Sexing of chinchillas is done by comparing the length from anus to genital region, with males having a longer distance comparatively.

They become reproductively active at 8-18 months, with a breeding season stretching from November to May. The female has about a 40 day cycle at this time, with gestation lasting 105-118 days. Up to two litters a year can be produced, each with usually 2 offspring. The newborn weighs in at 35 grams with open eyes, and ready to wean at 6-8 weeks.

HOUSING:

Chinchillas are active, needing lots of space to jump and climb. A cage should be wire mesh, with areas to get off the wiring, be taller than it is wide, and a small gauge (15mm x 15mm) to prevent leg injuries. The minimum cage dimensions would be 17" x 17" x 24" for each animal. Being from the Andes Mountains originally, chinchillas do very poorly in hot weather; with the accepted range being 60-70° F. Chinchillas do not deal with high humidity well either, so recommended levels vary 40-60%.

The cage should be cleaned at least every seven days. Equipment to be used: scrub brush, dish soap, and water. The cage should then be dried before the animal is returned. Twice a month, the cage should be disinfected with a bleach solution of about a half cup of bleach for each gallon of water. Let the bleach stay on the cage for at least 15 minutes, then rinse and dry.

A chinchilla's light cycle works best with 12 hours of light followed by twelve hours of darkness. Visual security is extremely important, as chinchillas are nocturnal and like to sleep during the day. This can be provided by a wooden hide box.

As previously mentioned, chinchillas teeth continually grow, and they need objects to gnaw on. Branches and wood blocks are some of the recommended chew toys.

An important behavior in chinchillas is dust bathing to clean the fur. This need can be met with commercial dust which is silver sand and Fuller's earth at a 9:1 ratio. Offer this daily in a pan deep enough to roll in and then remove to avoid fecal contamination.

Chinchillas can be housed in pairs or groups, but dominant females can become aggressive. This is displayed by growling, teeth chattering, and urinating. Increasing cage size and the number of hide boxes is the starting point to solve this problem. Males normally do not show aggression towards the young, so breeding pairs can remain paired throughout the year.

HANDLING:

A chinchilla is normally very docile, rarely bites, and less restraint is better when handling them. The proper method is to gently lift at the tail base, supporting the chest and fore limbs with the other hand. If frightened or handled roughly, chinchillas will release a portion of their hair (called “fur-slipping”), and it will re-grow in 3-5 months. Urine spraying is another defense mechanism.

DIET:

Chinchillas are strict herbivores. Commercially available pellets especially made for chinchillas are the best option, although rabbit or guinea pig pellets can be substituted if necessary. The pellets need a minimum of 2700 calories/kilogram, 16-20% protein, 2-5% fat, and 18% fiber.

Feeding these alone can predispose the chinchilla to inflammation of the intestines. This can be avoided by providing an unlimited amount of good quality hay; such as timothy, on a daily basis. Watch out for moldy hay which can lead to a dangerously toxic condition, since chinchillas can not vomit.

Fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains can be given in small quantities as treats several times a week. Consult a veterinarian before changing the diet. Any dietary changes should be gradual to prevent complications.

Water should always be available and can be in a sipper bottle or an automatic drinker. The bottle should be emptied and refilled daily with fresh water to prevent bacterial growth.

HEALTH ISSUES:

1. **Eyes:** Irritation from dust baths can be a problem. This can be solved by stopping the baths for several weeks and applying the correct medicine from the veterinarian. Eye

infections can also indicate a more serious respiratory infection, which the veterinarian needs to see immediately.

2. **Mouth:** Dental disease (referred to as the ‘slobbers’) from teeth malocclusions (misalignment/abnormalities) is the most common medical problem seen in chinchillas. This manifests with drooling, pawing at the mouth, and not eating. Trimming by the veterinarian of the chinchilla’s teeth usually corrects this problem.
3. **Breathing:** Pneumonia can be caused by overcrowding, poor air circulation, high humidity, etc.... It manifests with nasal discharge, not eating, depression, difficulty breathing, and/or “swollen glands.” If any of these signs are seen the veterinarian should be consulted immediately.
4. **Eating Disorders:** If diarrhea, abdominal pain, constipation, eversion of pink/red rectum from the anus is seen, the veterinarian should be consulted immediately. Causes include; rapid diet change, too high protein and/or fat or low fiber in the diet, and disease.
5. **Brain:** Signs of wobbliness, circles, and convulsions can indicate a disease associated with poor sanitation and contaminated feed. Lead poisoning occurs in free roaming chinchillas and is manifested by convulsions and blindness. The veterinarian should be consulted immediately with any of these signs.
6. **Overheating:** If it gets above 80° F or there is high humidity, the chinchilla will pant, drool, collapse, and even die. Immediate treatment is a cool water bath, keeping its head kept above the water; a veterinarian should be consulted immediately.
7. **Difficult Births:** If your female has been bred, difficulty can manifest from the babies being too big, the female’s pelvis being too small, poor nutrition, or disease. The veterinarian should be consulted immediately, with cesarean sections a possibility.
8. **Medicine:** There are several types of medicine that are not to be given to chinchillas, these include; oral penicillins, cephalosporins, and macrolides. So consult a knowledgeable veterinarian before giving your chinchilla anything.