

# Is a Chinchilla for me?

## Debbie Kay considers keeping Chinchillas as pets



Chinchillas are very popular as pets. However a degree of thought should be given as to whether or not a chinchilla is the right pet for you. I have listed some general pros and cons on chinchilla keeping but please remember that there are exceptions to every rule!!

### Is a chinchilla a suitable pet for you?

Chinchillas can be a little nervous and highly-strung, so they are not always suitable pets for young children or very busy, noisy households. They can take a long time to settle down into a new home and over-come their natural fear of people so need time and patience when settling into a new home.

Chinchillas can live for over 20 years - although 10-15 years appears to be the average life-span. Chinchillas like company and are social animals. If kept alone, they require plenty of daily attention (and reasonable exercise) to avoid boredom and loneliness.

If kept in male/female pairs breeding is generally inevitable and spare cages will be required for weaning litters and to separate the female from the male periodically, to avoid over-breeding her. Same-sex pairs can be kept together, provided they have been introduced slowly (preferably as juveniles). Caution should be taken when caging males together, as they have been known to fight when they reach maturity.

Although chinchillas can adapt to your life-style they are generally crepuscular by nature, and can be noisy during the night if kept in a bedroom.

Their diet of hay and the need for a regular sandbath can prove to be problematic for asthmatics.

### Where to buy a chinchilla

I recommend buying from a reputable breeder. This way, you can ensure several things:

Firstly, some background history with your chinchilla, which is important if you are purchasing breeding stock, as some problems can be genetic. Secondly your chinchilla may have been bred, from strong bloodlines.

Finally you will get an accurate age for your chinchilla and you should also be able to get some good advice on their care.

### Tips for settling in Chinchillas

Do not put your chinchilla straight in the same cage with an existing chinchilla. Chinchillas are territorial, and may fight, with sometimes fatal results. It is wise to keep a new chinchilla quite separate from existing chinchillas, for at least a fortnight. This is to ensure that your new purchase is free from any contagious ailments that may be passed onto existing stock. Quarantining new pets is something often over-looked by pet owners.

Give your new chinchilla plenty of time to settle into its new environment before handling it or letting it out of the cage for exercise. A happy chinchilla should feel safe and secure in its new cage and this will help the chinchilla to become more confident. A nestbox placed in the cage will give the chinchilla somewhere to hide away in if it feels frightened.

Try to keep the new chinchilla on the same food that it has been used to. Any change of diet should be done slowly to avoid possible stomach upsets.

Introduce potential cage-mates to each other very slowly (by initially caging side-by-side, then allowing the chins to exercise together on neutral territory, supervised at all times). It can take weeks before they accept each other well enough to be caged together.

Chinchillas are not always compatible with other pets. Noisy animals kept in the same room can cause stress-related behavioural problems in chinchillas.

They can be very destructive if allowed free-access around the house for exercise, as their instinct is to chew on hard objects (including chairs and tables). Therefore chinchilla-proofing an area of the house is recommended to preserve your furniture!

### Normal Chinchilla Behaviour

Chinchillas may be nervous around strangers, but don't let that put you off. A healthy chinchilla is a naturally curious animal and if you place your hand quietly in its cage it should eventually come forward to gingerly sniff your hand, eventually!!

There are few differences between males and females, and both make suitable acquisitions as pets, with regard to their general behaviour.

A chinchilla that sprays you (females spray urine when feeling threatened), or rears up onto its back legs, baring teeth and "growling" at you, (a threat display more commonly associated with fear, rather than aggression) is obviously not used to much human contact. They may still make good pets eventually, with time and patience, but some people may prefer to start off with a chinchilla that is slightly less intimidated by people. So start off with a chinchilla that is slightly less intimidated by people.

### What to Look For

Bright, wide-open eyes, with no signs of discharge or flattening of fur around. Clean ears, held erect (unless chin has just been woken up!!) A clean and dry nose. Genital/anal regions should be clean and dry and free from soiling. Fur should be velvety and plushy-looking with no matted or bald areas.

The chinchilla should feel firm and solid and certainly not bony when handled. The front incisors should be even and chisel-shaped, and a yellow to orange colour (if the chinchilla is adult). Droppings should be of normal appearance (dark, smooth, plump and oval - like a small cavy dropping).

### Transporting your new chinchilla home

Always bring a suitable chew-proof container to transport your new pet home in. However, some breeders will allow you to buy a small show-cage from them, which doubles as a carrying cage.

Cardboard boxes are not suitable for long journeys, as chinchillas are quite capable of chewing large holes in them, in a relatively short period of time.

Although most chinchillas will not eat during transit, a handful of hay and a slice of apple should at least be offered if the journey is likely to exceed 2 hours.

Do not be tempted to travel with a chinchilla if it is a hot day. Chinchillas are very susceptible to the heat and even a short journey can increase the risk of heat-stroke. If you have a car air-con - then put it up on full - and screen the windows to block out any direct sun. □