

# Chinchilla care guide



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Helping pets and their people



# Introduction to chinchillas

Wondering how to care for chinchillas?  
You're in the right place!

In this handy guide, we tackle all-important questions to help you decide if Chinchillas are the right pet for you. And, if you already have chinchillas, you might just learn something new!

Chinchillas are beautiful with their amazing fur and big, saucer-like ears. They're usually very active and enjoy having lots of space to run and jump around outside their enclosure each day. If they're well socialised, chinchillas can become very tame. But they're also crepuscular, which means they're very active at dusk and dawn, and that doesn't suit every family!

## Fast facts

**Male name:** Buck. **Female name:** Doe.

**Life expectancy:** 12-20 years.

**Companionship:** Chinchillas much prefer the company of their own kind and are most happy living in same sex pairs or small groups. A castrated male can also live with one or more females.

**Accommodation:** Chinchillas love exploring their surroundings! They're very active and can gnaw through plastic easily, so they'll need a large metal cage with a metal floor.

**Diet:** Chinchillas are herbivores. They need ample good-quality hay, pellets and natural treats such as dried herbs, flowers and safe tree bark.

**Health:** Chinchillas are prone to dental disease when they're on the wrong diet. They can live up to 20 years, so there will be times where they need to see the vet. Find a chinchilla-friendly vet for the best possible care.

**Family friendly:** Chinchillas are best suited to families with older children or adult-only homes. This is because some don't enjoy being handled and find sudden loud noises frightening, which can disturb your chinchillas' daytime sleep. Some chinchillas really enjoy interacting with their humans, though! They might take food from your hands and hop over you during free-range play time.



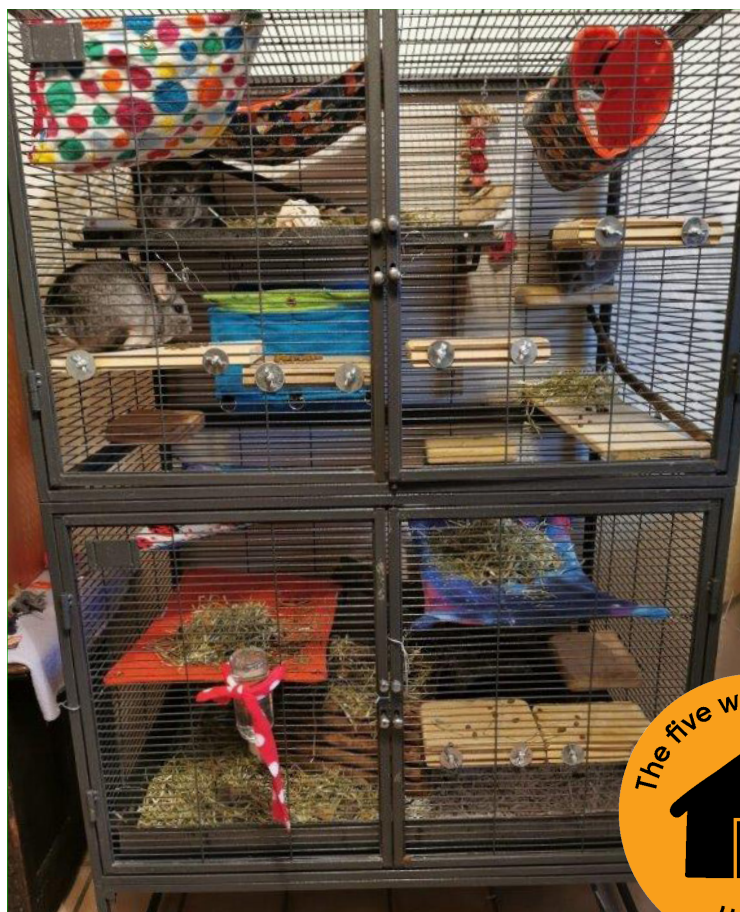


# Accommodation

Chinchillas are little bundles of energy so they need lots of space to run around! This will help them to stay healthy and happy.

## The minimum cage size for two to three chinchillas

123cm high by 93cm wide by 63cm deep (these dimensions do not include a cage stand). Bar spacing – up to 18mm.



## Where to place your cage

When you're choosing where to put your chinchilla cage, make sure it's:

- away from busy areas and loud noises like the TV or music system
- in a well-ventilated room to help prevent odours from building up
- in a room where the temperature can be kept around 10-15°C (go to page 21 to find out why)
- away from windows and draughts
- somewhere with low humidity
- away from direct or constant sunlight, although the room will need a natural daylight source
- away from radiators, or make sure they're switched off
- safe from other pets such as cats and dogs
- safe from young, unsupervised children.

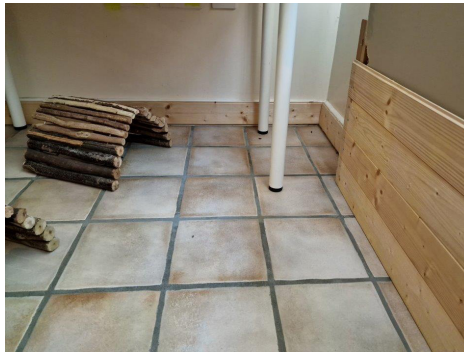




## Free-range time

Once your chinchillas are settled with your daily routine and are happy to feed from your hands, you can build up to free-range time to 30 minutes or more each day. This will need to be in a secure room, ideally the same one that the cage is housed in. By doing this, they will feel safe to explore the room and can hop back into their enclosure if they feel spooked by anything.

Your chinchillas will love zooming around and springing all over the place exploring. So, you'll need to make sure the room is completely safe and chinchilla-proof. This includes protecting all wires and removing any house plants. Chinchillas are renowned for chewing everything in sight, so be prepared for their little teeth to gnaw through anything and everything they can reach – even your skirting boards! You can prevent damage to your home by covering skirting boards with safe wood, attaching metal strips to any corners of the wall, and providing plenty of safe things for them to chew.



Free-range time is a great opportunity to sit, socialise and even health check your chinchillas. You can set up the space with lots of different toys for them to explore and interact with. They'll also enjoy jumping on you and using you as a lookout tower!



# Enrichment

It may come as no surprise that lively pets like chinchillas are happiest when they have items in their cage they can chew and jump on. Make sure to spruce up their cage with safe items that won't injure your chinchillas.

## Your chinchillas will enjoy:

- **Twigs, stumps and branches from apple, hazel, willow** (weeping or pussy willow only) or pear trees for them to chew and jump on.
- **Wooden boxes** for them to hide in.
- **Wooden platforms** – chinchillas love to leap from level to level and these platforms are great for breaking up the space and preventing falls from a height.
- **Hammocks** made from anti-pill fleece. Like the wooden platforms, hammocks are great for letting your chinchilla jump around and they also break up the space, helping prevent falls.
- **Ceramic or metal tunnels** – if your chinchilla is prone to chewing card, avoid using card tunnels to reduce the risk of intestinal blockages
- **Ceramic or granite tile** for helping them keep cool in the summer months
- **A dust bath** in a metal tray for them to dust bathe in several times a week. Avoid leaving it in permanently as they may start using it as a toilet and their skin could become overly dry.
- **16" metal upright wheel.**

Chinchillas also often prefer to sleep high up in their cage, so make sure they all have easy access to plenty of wooden platforms.



## Avoid these chinchilla toys:

- **Plastic toys**, as these will be destroyed very quickly and may become dangerous.
- **Ladders** – these aren't safe for chinchillas as they can cause leg injuries.
- **Hanging toys**, like parrot or rodent ropes and swings, as these aren't safe. As chinchillas are very fast and reactive, they can damage their legs or become caught on hanging items. They can also cause intestinal blockages if eaten.
- Also avoid any toys the chinchillas may trap their legs in while jumping about or get their heads stuck in. This includes all **hanging hay balls and many hay racks**.
- Take extra care and monitor individual chinchillas with items that can easily be chewed such as **card or paper**, as these can cause blockages in the digestive system if swallowed.

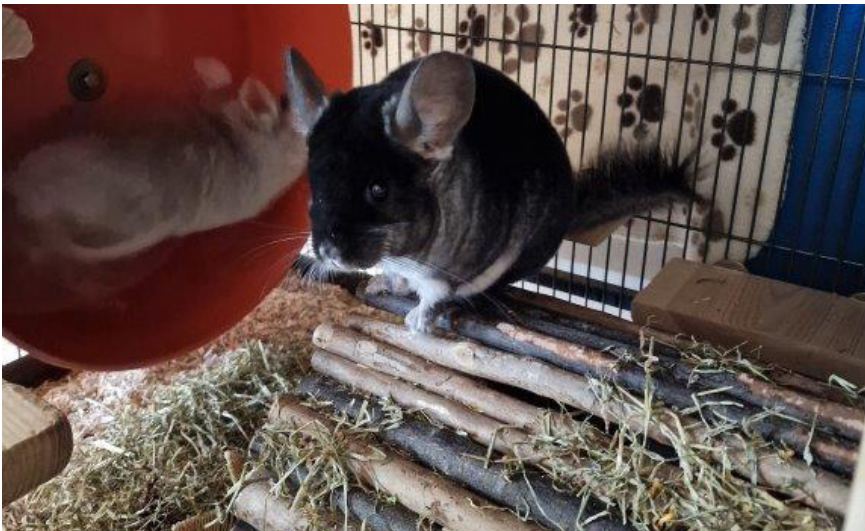


## Bedding materials

It's important to use the correct bedding for your chinchillas, otherwise it could have a negative effect on their health. Wood shavings or sawdust can be very dusty and are a common cause of skin related issues. It's not just the chinchillas who might have problems; these can give you an allergic reaction, too!

Make sure your chinchillas have a nice, soft bedding base for their cage, rather than using a mesh floor. This will avoid injury to their feet and help meet their natural behavioural and environmental needs.

Base of cage options	Nesting/comfy bedding to place in hiding spaces and for eating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hemp bedding such as Aubiose (non-fragranced).</li> <li>• Aspen.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft, short, sweet smelling, good-quality meadow hay.</li> </ul>



## Cleaning

Keeping your chinchilla cage clean is key to preventing illness. Here's how to keep it looking its best, so your chinchillas feel their best:

Daily – spot clean	Fortnightly – full clean
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Remove poo and wet/dirty bedding.</li> <li>2. Replace dirty bedding.</li> <li>3. Change their water.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Place chinchillas in a secure wire mesh carrier with plenty of bedding from their cage in the base, along with a hiding space.  Place the carrier in a safe, quiet space away from where you're cleaning.</li> <li>2. Remove soiled toys, soiled or damaged enrichment items, and bottles, then clean them with pet-friendly disinfectant. Dispose of any toys which have been chewed and may become dangerous.</li> <li>3. For any hammocks, wash in your washing machine with non-bio detergent at 60°C.</li> <li>4. Fully sweep out their cage and wipe down with pet-friendly disinfectant.</li> <li>5. Set up the enclosure with fresh bedding and place different enrichment in the cage for interest.</li> </ol>





## Chinchilla companionship

Chinchillas need friends, too! They're very sociable and love the companionship of other chinchillas. You'll often spot them cosying up with one another. If you find yourself with a lone chinchilla of any age, contact Woodgreen or your local rescue centre to find your chinchilla a companion.

### How many chinchillas?

In the wild, chinchillas live in large herds of between 12-100, covering a large area of land. They enjoy feeding and grooming together, and will also use one another for security.

At home, chinchillas should be housed in same-sex pairs or small groups, or a castrated male can live with one or more females.





# Introducing your chinchillas to each other

If you find yourself with a lone chinchilla, please get in touch as we may be able to help! We often have chinchillas looking for homes and can offer you advice on how to introduce them for the best chance of success!

## How to introduce them

Introducing chinchillas to a new companion must be done with great care and patience. When

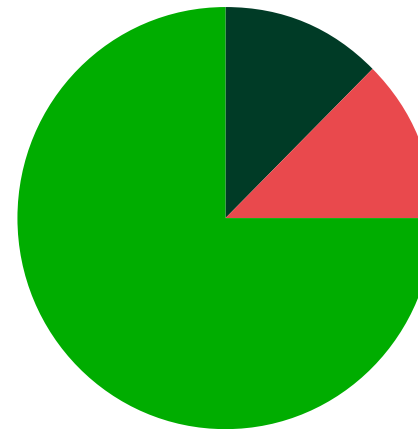
doing this, it's best to use the 'side-by-side' (split mix) method. This involves having their cages side-by-side for a week or two to let them get used to the idea of living together before introducing them in a neutral space. You may need to give them several 'play dates' in the neutral area before they are comfortable enough in each other's company for a longer period.



# Feeding your chinchillas

Chinchillas are herbivores, so they only eat plant-based food, and no meat. Feed your chinchillas a good-quality pellet food diet to avoid health conditions like dental disease and obesity.

Your chinchilla's diet should be made up of the following:



**75%**  
good-quality hay

**12.5%**  
good-quality  
chinchilla pellet food

**12.5%**  
healthy forage







## Hay

Spread hay around their whole enclosure, on shelves and in hiding spaces. Chinchillas need constant access to hay as it makes up the largest portion of their diet. It's also great for helping to keep their teeth healthy, so they not only feel good but look their best, too!

**Offer a mixture of varieties such as:**

- Timothy hay
- Meadow hay
- Orchard hay
- Alfalfa hay – this can be fed to pregnant chinchillas, nursing chinchillas, and young chinchillas that are still growing. For adult chinchillas, it can be fed in small amounts as an occasional treat.



## Pellets

Each chinchilla needs around 30g of pellets per day. Chinchillas shouldn't be fed muesli mixes because they're high in sugar and can lead to dental problems. Here at Woodgreen, we feed our chinchillas on Science Selective chinchilla pellets, which you can buy online or from pet shops. Instead of placing their food in a bowl, mix things up by scattering it around their enclosure for them to search and forage for, like a mini treasure hunt!

## Water

Your chinchillas need access to fresh, clean water every day. Provide water in at least two bottles or securely mounted bowls in separate areas of the cage. If you have a large, two-tier cage, you can put a bottle or bowl on each level. That way, your chinchillas can stay healthy and hydrated if one bottle or bowl breaks or spills.





## Forage

As well as feeding them pelleted food, scatter around 4 tablespoons of healthy forage per chinchilla, per day.

Below are a few examples of what you can feed your chinchillas daily. They'll need a variety of these foods, so only give each type in small amounts:

- Apple, pear, willow (weeping, or pussy willow only) or hazel tree twigs and branch cuttings.
- Wild rose – remove any large thorns.
- Dried flowers such as marigold, dandelion, hibiscus, rose, cactus, cornflowers.
- Dried leaves such as birch, apple, nettle, pear, plantain, rose.

- Dried herbs and roots such as dandelion or mallow.

## Healthy treats

(to be fed occasionally):

Avoid colourful chew sticks. Instead, stick to healthy, natural food options, just feeding them occasionally alongside their weekly diet:

- Dried rose hip (feed as an occasional treat).
- Dried hibiscus flowers.
- Bitesize shredded wheat (sparingly, as this can cause gas).
- Rolled oats (sparingly, as this can also cause gas).
- Chinchilla cookies (visit our website to find out how to make your own chinchilla-safe cookies).



## Handling your chinchillas

Chinchillas are naturally fast and wriggly, and many don't enjoy being handled. When they arrive in their new home, leave them for a few days to let them settle before trying to get them out for some free-range time.

## How to socialise your chinchillas

Spend time socialising your chinchillas to help them feel safe and confident around you, and they may learn to enjoy being handled in their own time. Slow and steady wins the race!

Take 10-20 minutes each evening to talk to your chinchillas and offer them a healthy treat to encourage them to feed from your hands (tip: hibiscus always seems to be a winner!). Once they feel confident with this, offer them your arm to sniff and hop onto. Never try to grab your chinchilla suddenly as this can cause them a lot of stress.







## How to pick up your chinchillas

If you need to pick up your chinchillas for health checks, while giving treatment or during free-range time:

- ensure they're alert and aware of your movements — quietly talking to your chinchilla lets them know you're there
- place a tunnel out for them to walk into so you can safely lift them without causing stress
- hold them against your chest with all four of their feet on you, while taking care not to put pressure onto the ribcage – chinchillas have very thin ribs and a very flexible ribcage and can damage their lungs if they are held too tightly.



## Never pick your chinchilla up by the tail.

Always make sure you handle your chinchillas slowly and avoid surprises, as this can cause fur slip. This is when your chinchilla releases a clump of their fur to loosen your grip and escape. Although it does not harm them and the fur will regrow, it can be very stressful and is a response to fear.



## Transporting your chinchillas

It's important that you always have a suitable pet carrier available in case you need to take your chinchillas to the vet, or to use whilst you clean out their enclosure.

Chinchillas are little escape artists when it comes to cardboard boxes or plastic carriers, which can quickly and easily be chewed through. Wire mesh carriers like this one are perfect for your chinchillas instead.

To keep them relaxed and happy, place some of the bedding from their cage in the base of the carrier, along with a small amount of scattered food, and a house for them to hide in or a platform/hammock to sit on. Cover the carrier with a fleece blanket to help them feel safe and secure.



## Finding a vet

It's really important to find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with chinchillas. Most vets see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs. But they might rarely see other species such as chinchillas. So, finding someone who has lots of experience of seeing, diagnosing and treating these species is vital.

- **Look for an Exotics Veterinary Practice** – they may have more experience and might be cheaper than other vets.
- **Talk to friends and family** who own or have owned chinchillas to see if there are any vets in particular they recommend.
- **Talk to veterinary practices** to find out if there are any chinchilla savvy vets within the practice – don't be afraid to ask them how many they see on a weekly basis to help you decide whether they're the right vet for you.

## Dental health

Chinchillas can be prone to dental problems. Unless they've inherited them from their parents, dental problems are usually due to a poor diet, an inappropriate

environment, or even falling from a height and hitting their head/face.

You'll only be able to see your chinchillas' front set of teeth easily, known as the incisors. These should be dark orange in colour. The top and bottom set should meet nicely, be level, and not be at an angle.

**If you spot any of the following signs, your chinchilla could have dental problems, so contact your vet as soon as possible:**

- One or both eyes weeping.
- Drooling.
- Playing with food but not eating it completely.
- Teeth becoming lighter in colour.
- Teeth appearing to be growing apart or at an angle.
- Face appearing swollen or abscess appearing along jaw line.
- Reduced amount or size of faeces
- Matted fur on the inside of their front legs or chin.





## Fatal heat stress

A chinchilla's fabulous fur is very dense, which means they're very sensitive to temperature changes. They can struggle to cope with the increasingly warm summer months we have, as they can't sweat to keep themselves cool like we can. They may quickly overheat, which leads to potentially life-threatening heat stress. Chinchillas need to have food in their stomachs at all times, and heat stress can commonly lead to them losing their appetite. This can lead to gut stasis which may be fatal.

### Signs of heat stress can include:

- restlessness
- drooling
- lethargy (not moving around as normal or appearing limp and listless)
- rapid breathing
- not being interested in food
- seizure.

If you notice any of these signs, call your chinchilla-friendly vet immediately.

The best way to prevent heat stress is to keep the temperature in your chinchillas' room at around **10-15°C**.

## Gut stasis

Chinchillas need a fully belly of fibre at all times. Their digestive tract should have food moving thorough it constantly to keep it working normally. Gut stasis is a condition where the pH in a chinchilla's digestive tract changes. This causes them pain and a build-up of gas and, if not treated immediately, their whole digestive tract can stop working, which can be fatal. Gut stasis can be caused by many things including stress, heat stress and ingesting something that causes a blockage.

If you notice your chinchilla stops eating, is passing less faeces than normal or appears to be laying stretched out and looking uncomfortable, it's crucial that you take them to see a vet immediately. They'll give you medication to help your chinchilla feel more comfortable and start eating again. They may also advise you to syringe feed your chinchilla a soft recovery food if they're not eating at all.

## Leg injuries

Chinchillas are adventurers, always darting around to explore – but they don't have great eyesight. This means they could fall from a height or get seriously injured by tangling themselves up. You can keep your chinchillas safe and happy by making sure their environment meets their needs. We recommend including chinchilla -safe non-pill fleece hammocks or large safe wooden platforms to break any falls. There should be enough items in the cage that your chinchilla cannot fall more than about 30cm at once.

Avoid wire platforms, wire ramps and any items that the chinchilla could jump on and get their leg trapped in if they move suddenly. If you notice any change in your chinchillas' movements or swellings in their legs, talk to your vet.

## Diabetes

Chinchillas are prone to diabetes; they have a very low sugar diet in the wild and this needs to be replicated in the home. To keep them in tip-top shape, avoid feeding fruits or vegetables as treats and follow the diet advice in this guide.





## Health checking your chinchillas

Make sure you health check your chinchillas every week or two and look out for any changes in their behaviour every day – chinchillas can be very good at hiding health issues until they're really suffering. If you have any worries, act quickly and contact your chinchilla-savvy vet.

**Weight** – use small scales, like kitchen scales, to monitor their weight. Look out for unexpected or consistent weight loss/gain.

**Ears, nose and mouth** – should be clean, and free of any discharge and flaky or scabby patches. No noisy breathing.

**Eyes** – should be clean, clear and bright.

**Skin, coat and tail should:**

- be clean and healthy looking
- have no fur loss or matting
- have no red, flaky skin/dandruff
- have no wounds or scratches.

**Feet and toes** – their feet are naturally pink and will usually have small calluses on the soles. Make sure they are free of any sores, cracked skin, inflammation, or signs of injury.

**Body** – should be free of any lumps or bumps.

**Nails** – should be a regular length. Most won't need to have their toenails trimmed as they'll naturally wear down whilst exploring.

**Teeth** – top and bottom incisors (front teeth) should be dark orange in colour, smooth, and wearing evenly against one another.

**Bottom and genitals** – should be clean and dry



# Looking for more expert pet advice?

We cover a range of different topics on our website – and not just for your small furry friends, but cats and dogs, too!

Not only that, but we also offer phone appointments, workshops, training classes, webinars and courses.

Find out more at **woodgreen.org.uk**,  
**scan the QR code below**  
or call **0300 303 9333**.



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