

Feeding your pet chinchilla

When chinchillas were first imported from South America - at first into the United States, and then into Europe - people found it really difficult, at first, to keep them alive in captivity. This was mainly because of a lack of understanding of what wild chinchillas eat. Chinchillas are entirely herbivorous - they only eat vegetable matter - and where they live in the wild, most of the vegetation is quite fibrous and dry, not lush and juicy! They eat grasses and other low-growing greenstuff, and chew the bark off trees.

What should I feed my chinchilla?

Chinchillas need a diet that is high in fibre, quite high in protein, but low in moisture and very low in fat. High fat foods will cause liver disease and greenstuff that is too lush will give them colic or bloat. A diet lacking in fibre will cause poor gut movement, and allow the teeth to get overgrown. Chinchilla teeth, like those of rabbits and guinea pigs, grow constantly throughout the life of the animal, and need to be worn down by constant chewing.

The most important part of the diet for your chinchilla is hay. There should always be hay available. It must be good quality hay - sweet smelling, not musty, and certainly without any trace of mould. Feed the hay in a small rack and refill it each day, removing any that's been pulled out of the rack.

Is there a less messy alternative to hay?

Alfalfa block are much less messy, but some chinchillas don't like them. You can give them a try, but don't stop giving hay completely until you are sure your chinchilla is happy eating alfalfa. It is important that your chinchilla eats plenty of fibre.

What other things can I feed?

Chinchilla pellets can be a convenient food source. However they should be rationed (except for pregnant or lactating females or very underweight chinchillas). A healthy adult chinchilla needs about a heaped tablespoon of pellets each day. If he is still hungry, he should be encouraged to eat more hay.

Chinchilla mixes are also available but these vary in quality. A good chinchilla mix should be high in fibre and have a fat level of 3% or less. It should be sold in small sealed packets, and smell sweet and fresh once opened. The problem with mixes is that they allow the chinchilla to select his favourite items and leave the rest - which may mean that he ends up with less than a balanced diet. This can be controlled to some extent by only feeding a small amount at a time and not topping the bowl up when it is empty. Muesli mixes should be avoided.

Ideally pellets should be fed as they prevent selective feeding. However, they come in two types; the genuine chinchilla pellet is very thin, long and very, very hard, giving lots of good gnawing exercise. The other type is broader, shorter and more crumbly (more like rabbit pellets) - these are of poorer quality.

Should I feed my chinchilla supplements?

Most chinchillas, especially young animals or mothers with kits, occasionally have fits caused by low calcium levels in the blood. This may be caused by the diet being too low in calcium or the chinchilla being unable to take up and use the calcium in the diet. In these cases, or if the chinchilla has developed tooth problems, your vet may suggest that you give a vitamin/mineral supplement. However, over-supplementation, or wrong supplementation can cause problems; so do check with your vet first.

Can I treat my chinchilla to some titbits?

Most chinchillas will do almost anything for a peanut, a raisin or a sunflower seed. Unfortunately, only one of these is a good idea - both peanuts and sunflower seeds are very high in fat so can contribute to liver disease (although the odd one or two every now and then won't do much harm). Raisins and sultanas are treats traditionally fed to chinchillas, and yes, they are very sweet which could lead to dental disease if fed in large quantities, but they are generally safe treats to feed... in moderation!

Do chinchillas eat like guinea pigs?

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Chinchillas are related to guinea pigs, but this doesn't mean their diets are the same. Chinchillas cannot cope with very lush green vegetation, however, you can feed things like carrot and apple (in small quantities), they also like to chew on branches of apple, pear or mulberry, and will eat other course weeds like plantain. However, if you feed anything from the garden, make sure it is free of chemicals.

Any changes you make to your chinchillas diet must be made very slowly, adding just a very little of the new food to start with, and remember don't feed anything too lush or watery.

Can poor diet lead to any diseases?

High fat diets can cause liver disease and even death; this could be a cause of overfeeding sunflower seeds or peanuts.

Dental problems can be caused through lack of chewing; therefore plenty of hay should be fed along with a good quality pelleted feed. Teeth problems can also be due, in part, to poor calcium metabolism.

Digestive problems can be caused through feeding poor quality, mouldy hay. Ensure your chinchillas hay is stored properly; if rats or mice get access to it, then chinchillas may develop listeriosis, an often fatal disease which can also affect people.

If you need any other information on health issues concerning your pet, please contact Briarhill Veterinary Clinic on 091 38 00 00 and we will be happy to advise you.