

Maintaining a Healthy Chinchilla

How to help your chinchilla fight illness.

By Jennifer Mons McLaughlin

One of the challenges of owning a chin is determining when the animal is sick.

"Chinchillas hide their illnesses until it is almost too late," said Amanda Eads, archive chairman of the Chinchillas As Pets Association.

For this reason, owners must pay close attention to their animals and know what is normal for their eating, sleeping, bowel and bladder habits. The best rule of thumb is to contact a veterinarian if a change occurs.

Although chins do hide illness well and can be ill before their owners realize it, they generally have a long life span. "Chinchillas can live 20-plus years. I knew of one that was 27 years old," said Misty O'Neil, owner of Eyes of Texas Chinchillas in Round Rock, Texas. "On the same note, they're the most fragile animal I've ever known."

To keep a chin healthy, pet owners should maintain a comfortable environment and avoid extreme temperatures. "Chinchillas are most comfortable between 65 and 70 degrees," said Deborah Seward, co-owner of Seward Breeders, Ohio Pet Chinchilla in Geneva, Ohio. "Humidity and/or high temps are deadly to a chinchilla."

Chinchillas do not sweat or pant, so they do not have the ability to cool down if they get too hot. "Air conditioning is mandatory if you have a chinchilla, or they could die from heatstroke," Seward said. "A fan does not cool a chinchilla; it only blows hot air on them."

Dental problems can become an issue, with malocclusion being one of the most common. "There is no surgical treatment, and it is not always genetic," O'Neil said. "It can come from getting food stuck in the teeth, and typically there's no way to fix it." Symptoms might include watery eyes, wet chest or paws, drooling and loss of appetite.

The best way to fight illness is prevention and that includes taking the animal to a veterinarian at least once a year. Take your pet more often if something seems to be out of the ordinary.

"It is easier to prevent problems than to treat them," said Lani Ritchey, author of *The Joy Of Chinchillas* and chin owner for more than 25 years. "Always watch your chinchillas chewing, pooping and peeing habits. Those may be the only clues you have that something is going wrong."

Healthy pets require exercise. Chins like to play and enjoy exercise, but always supervise them when they're out of the cage because they like to chew on things.

Some owners allow chins to play in bathrooms, where there are no exposed electrical wires or entertainment centers to hide behind. Others put them in a hallway with closed doors.

However, think twice about putting your pet in an enclosed plastic ball unless it is very well-ventilated. "I have talked to many people of all ages who have had chins that have suffered heatstroke from being in them," O'Neil said.