

Chinchilla Chews Wheel And Escapes Cage

Is it normal for a chinchilla to chew a lot?

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Posted: May 13, 2009, 5 a.m. EDT

Q: My chinchilla has chewed up her plastic exercise wheel twice in the past four months. She chews it until large gaps are made in the running surface of the wheel, and I remove it for her safety. She also recently chewed through the plastic zip-ties used to hold her large cage together, which allowed her to escape.

I recently bought all the things I could think of that she might need: mineral and salt blocks for chewing, a "hollow log" for her to hide in and chew on, a new exercise wheel and a new water bottle. I don't know what to do about her chewing. Is she bored or lacking something important in her diet?

A: Chinchillas are rodents. Rodents have continuously growing teeth. Chinchilla teeth grow as much as 1/4 to 1/2 inch per month. In order to prevent overgrowth of the teeth, the teeth must wear down as fast as they grow.

The natural diet of the chinchilla includes grasses, hays and pellets, and is reasonably abrasive. Daily chewing helps wear down the teeth, but the diet alone is not abrasive enough to provide adequate tooth wear, so chinchillas chew other items. Many chinchillas test each item in their cage, and if they can dent it with their teeth, they chew it. This includes wood, plastics and softer forms of aluminum.

Some nontoxic wood, such as white pine, fir or apple wood, seems to pass through the chinchilla without harm if ingested. Don't allow chinchillas to chew any toxic wood. Plastics and metals do not digest. Ingestion of plastics or metals can cause intestinal blockage, illness and possibly death.

To discourage a chinchilla from chewing inappropriate items, put some other chewables in the cage, like pieces of wood, chew logs, pumice chew blocks, etc. If the chinchilla continues to chew plastics or softer metals, then remove those items from the cage. There are a number of good exercise wheels that are made of harder metals like anodized aluminum or steel.

If the cage is held together by plastic ties, one solution is to replace the plastic ties with steel tie wire (soft steel wire that is available at most hardware stores). Another solution: Many pet stores sell metal clips that can be used to make cages from cage wire mesh. Purchase or borrow a crimping tool and some clips and secure the cage walls with these clips.

See more chinchilla expert questions and answers.