

Practices To Improve Chinchilla Health And Longevity

Our five major concerns are: Temperature, Malocclusion, Diet, Changes and Oils & Fats

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Q: Our chinchillas do not live more than 3 years. Why not? We feed them timothy hay, alpine hay or grass hay. We also feed them pellets. Give them fresh water. Some people here supplement their diet with fresh green vegetables, fresh fruits and some treats that include raisins, rosehips, herbs and chew toys from safe wood. Our cages are made of plastic and have a lot of shelves. This summer was a catastrophe, there were so many deaths. Could you please tell us why our chins are not lasting longer?

A: There are several possible causes of the deaths you mentioned. Some problems can be avoided by following a reasonable approach to health and safety.

1. **Temperature/humidity:** Chinchillas are susceptible to heatstroke if the temperature rises above 78 degrees Fahrenheit (25.6 degrees Celsius) and humidity is 60 percent or higher. True heatstroke can result in permanent brain/organ damage, illness and/or death. The best approach is to keep the chinchillas in areas where the temperature is controlled, as by air conditioning. If that is not possible, then move the chinchillas to the basement where it is cooler. Another possibility is to put a rock or terra cotta pot in the freezer and then place it in the chinchillas' cages — or freeze water in a bread pan and put that in the cage. These methods help keep chinchillas cooler but may not be enough. Moving the chinchillas to a cooler location is best.

2. **Malocclusion/slobbers:** This is a tooth disorder where the lower posterior teeth drift or tilt inwardly toward the midline of the mouth and the upper teeth may drift outwardly toward the cheeks. As the lower teeth drift inwardly, the normal chewing pattern grinds the inside of the lower teeth to a very sharp edge. This sharp edge cuts the tongue when the chinchilla tries to eat. Eventually, the tongue is unable to function; it cannot lift food onto the chewing surfaces. Eating becomes difficult and the chinchilla gradually starves to death.

If a chinchilla shows signs of heavy salivation (slobbers), the condition is already fairly advanced. This chinchilla should not have been sold and should not ever be bred. On rare occasion, malocclusion can become arrested, the teeth may stabilize for a few weeks or months, but this condition is usually fatal in the long term. There is a hereditary component to malocclusion. If a female chinchilla is bred too often or when she's too young (under 1 year of age), or if the diet is deficient in protein and nutrients, then the mother and the kits (babies) are more likely to develop malocclusion. The best approach to malocclusion is to feed a well-rounded diet, to be patient in breeding practices and allow the females to mature over 1 year, and to avoid bloodlines where malocclusion is present.

3. **Diet and daily routine:** A diet high in corn, fresh fruits and leafy, green vegetables may be well received by a chinchilla, but these foods alone will not supply all of the nutrients necessary to sustain good health. Chinchillas seem to thrive on diets of dry pellets specifically formulated for them. Pellet food should contain at least 20 percent crude protein and 18 percent crude fiber. Several handfuls of fresh timothy hay daily are recommended. Some fresh alfalfa hay can also be given sparingly to vary the diet. Feeding alfalfa more frequently can cause the chinchillas to gain excess weight. Too many nuts can cause digestive problems because chinchillas have difficulty digesting fats and oils. Too many sweet treats (raisins, dried cranberries, papaya or banana chips) can displace foods with better nutrient content and can contribute to diabetes in a chinchilla. We feed our chinchillas no more than one sweet treat per day, like 1/2 raisin or 1/2 dried cranberry. We also give them pieces of dried, whole wheat bread or a small portion of a non-frosted shredded wheat as treats.

4. **Changes:** Chinchillas do best when they have a consistent daily routine — feeding time is the same each day, food provided is the same each day, and their surroundings are constant.

When purchasing a new chinchilla, always buy two to three weeks worth of food that the chinchilla is currently eating. If you wish to change the diet, do so over two to three weeks. Gradually decrease the quantity of the original diet and slowly introduce the new diet. Changes in diet can cause digestive problems, possibly intestinal blockage. This can be serious. Early signs of digestive trouble are if the chinchilla stops eating or if the chinchilla droppings become smaller and lighter in color. If either is noticed, immediately feed the chinchilla some live culture yogurt. Live culture yogurt contains live

Lactobacillus acidophilus bacteria, which helps digestion. We use a small stick and place some on the lower lip. Soon the chinchilla starts licking. We feed 5 to 6 cc (1 teaspoon) several times per day until the droppings return to normal. Feeding liberal amounts of timothy hay provides roughage and promotes digestion.

5. Oils and fats: Chinchillas do not have a gallbladder. Without a gallbladder, they are unable to produce the enzymes that help digest fats and oils. Feeding nuts and oily seeds (sunflower seeds) to the chinchilla may disrupt digestion, may contribute to blockages, may cause liver damage, and can result in death. An occasional sunflower seed is usually well-tolerated.

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