

## PROJECT IDEA STARTER

# Chinchillas

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Chinchillas are rodents belonging to the family Chinchillidae, which includes four species of viscachas and two species of chinchillas. The two species of chinchillas are the *Chinchilla laniger* and *Chinchilla brevicaudata*. Wild chinchillas were originally native to the South American countries of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. They lived in naturally occurring rock clefts and dens, and would share their habitat with other rodents.

Chinchillas were prized by the native Inca Indians for their fur. In the 16th century, Spaniards moved into South America and trapped the chinchillas almost to extinction. Today, all trade in wild chinchillas is prohibited. Chinchillas are raised for breeding stock, the pet market, or the fur trade. Their appearance, temperament, and easy maintenance have made them attractive as pets.

Chinchillas have compact bodies, bushy tails, large eyes and ears, and long whiskers. They have short front legs, and they use their paws like fingers to hold their food. Their hind legs are longer and strong, enabling them to hop with ease. Adults typically weigh 1–2 pounds. Their body length is 10–14 inches, and their tail length is 5–7 inches. Females are generally larger than males. They have an average life expectancy of eight to 12 years. Males (bucks) are generally smaller than females (does) when fully grown.

The standard color of the chinchilla is gray, ranging from very light to very dark. The underside of the body is a lighter color, and can almost appear white. Selective breeding has produced mutant strains with beige, white, black, brown, silver, violet, or multicolored fur as some of the varieties.

Chinchillas communicate through vocalization. They make soft, cooing sounds of contentment. If they are alarmed or are showing signs of aggression, they make short, barking noises. When upset, they make spitting, growling sounds. Their warning cry is a shrill, whistle-like sound. When frightened or injured, they make mournful, baby-like cries.

Once accustomed to a household, some chinchillas become intensely curious and like to explore the house. They might be entertained by household activity, and might even attempt to play with other pets. Chinchillas can be nervous, sensitive animals.

## PLAN YOUR PROJECT

Use this idea starter AND publication 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide* as the starting place for your 4-H self-determined project. The *Self-Determined Project Guide* is available from your county OSU Extension office or on the Web at [ohio4h.org/selfdetermined](http://ohio4h.org/selfdetermined). You may choose to do a little or a lot depending on your level of interest. Be sure to register your project with your county OSU Extension office.

If a chinchilla becomes frightened or overexcited, a defense mechanism known as “fur slip” can occur. Fur slip occurs when a chinchilla releases a patch of fur, which leaves behind a spot of bare skin. A chinchilla should never be grabbed by its tail because the fur and skin of the tail could be removed, leaving bone exposed on the tail.

Always handle your chinchilla gently and carefully to avoid fur slip. When you approach your pet, speak softly and move slowly. While fully supporting its body, gently lift your chinchilla and let it sit on your hand or arm.

Handle your animal daily. It will become friendlier and more trusting with frequent handling. Chinchillas are generally not vicious, but you must be gentle with your pet and not scare it. Get your chinchilla accustomed to the transport cage that you will use to take it to judging. Cover the cage while in transport and until it is your time to exhibit, eliminating as much stress as possible to the chinchilla.



Proper handling of a chinchilla.



A one-week-old chinchilla.

Chinchillas are most comfortable at a constant temperature of 50–55 degrees Fahrenheit; therefore, they should be caged as indoor house pets. Adults can tolerate temperatures just above freezing, but they do not do well in stagnant or drafty areas. The chinchilla is sensitive to heat and is stressed by temperatures hotter than 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

Cages should be at least 30 inches high, 28 inches wide, and 20 inches deep. Chinchillas are very active animals and need room to exercise. They like to jump, hop, and climb. The cage must also be large enough to allow for a pan of dust used for grooming (see below).

An ideal cage for a chinchilla is a commercially made animal cage with a hard plastic solid tray and wire sides extending up from the plastic, and an attached wire top. You can provide your chinchilla with a den or hide box so it can hide if it is disturbed. You can also place inside the cage branches or platforms for perches so that your chinchilla can sit, climb, and jump.

Keep the cage against a wall so that no one can walk behind or around the chinchilla. Also, keep the cage where there is plenty of light, but don't keep it in direct sunlight.

Chinchillas are herbivores. The diet of wild chinchillas consists of grasses, leaves, fruits, bark, and certain species of cacti in their natural habitat. Chinchillas need roughage to remain healthy. Feed your pet high-quality commercial chinchilla pellets. These are made of compressed alfalfa meal, milled oats and corn, molasses, soybean oil, vitamins, and minerals. Put your chinchilla's pellets in a self-feeder or in a heavy crock, and feed your animal in the evening. Chinchillas love treats and prefer them over their regular diet. Offer treats during playtime or when taming your chinchilla. Digestive disturbances are common in chinchillas, and misuse of treats can cause diarrhea and other problems. Chinchillas, like other rodents, continually gnaw. Purchase chew toys made especially for chinchillas.

Chinchillas are generally healthy. Poor management practices and inadequate diet are frequent sources of health problems. Anything deviating from the normal routine can indicate that your chinchilla is sick. A chinchilla has thick fur that can be deceiving, so make sure your chinchilla's fur is not getting thin. Some health problems you should be aware of include diarrhea, constipation, malocclusion (when the upper and lower teeth do not align properly), conjunctivitis, enteritis, and fur biting.

Very little grooming is necessary if your animal is provided the proper diet and a pan with a thin layer (about one tablespoon) of chinchilla dust. Put a pan of chinchilla dust in your pet's cage once a day. Do not keep the pan of dust in the cage all of the time, because chinchillas can be obsessive with it. Chinchillas will roll in the dust and fluff their fur for as long as an hour. After they are finished, the pan can be removed. Undusted chinchillas lose their fluffiness and develop matted fur. Replace the chinchilla dust with fresh dust every two to four weeks.



A chinchilla grooming in a metal dust pan.

## AREAS OF INTEREST AND THINGS TO DO

Every self-determined 4-H project can be broken down into areas of interest. These are the specific things members want to address during their project adventures. Using 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide*, identify at least three areas of interest with at least three activities per area to explore. Take your ideas from the list below or make up your own.

### Selection

- ☐ Research pet laws in your state to make sure chinchillas are legal to have as pets.
- ☐ Create a budget of expenses that you will potentially incur to have a chinchilla as a pet. Research the cost of all of the following: the chinchilla, housing supplies, feed, and healthcare.
- ☐ Make a list of reputable breeders or pet stores that have chinchillas.
- ☐ Look at several chinchillas to see if you can correctly identify bucks versus does.
- ☐ Determine if you will select a young chinchilla or a mature chinchilla. Create a list of pros and cons for each age.
- ☐ Learn the signs of an unhealthy chinchilla and make a list of them. Look for indications while selecting your chinchilla.

### Proper Habitat

- ☐ Investigate and purchase appropriate housing for your chinchilla.
- ☐ Create a list of other items to add to the housing. Research what items are needed for a happy chinchilla.

- ☐ Purchase the appropriate items for feeding. Know the signs of your chinchilla when it's not eating or drinking properly. Research alternative methods of feeding and watering.
- ☐ Explore options for sleeping boxes. Find out the appropriate dimensions and conditions for ideal sleeping boxes.
- ☐ Learn about how much bedding will be needed for the housing space before buying what you need. What is the best option for bedding materials? Are they readily available in your area?
- ☐ Research the safest cleaning product options for your pet, then purchase them and create a schedule for cleaning.
- ☐ Research the ideal environment for your chinchilla. Create a list of how will you achieve these conditions.
- ☐ Chinchillas are nocturnal. Explore methods to train your chinchilla to your lifestyle.
- ☐ Describe your chinchilla's experience as it makes the transition into your home life.
- ☐ Design an appropriate exercise space for your chinchilla. Create a poster or take pictures of the space. Include a list of obstacles that could endanger your chinchilla and how you will avoid them.

### Nutrition

- ☐ Research the types of foods chinchillas need for a balanced diet. Not all commercial diets are ideal, so it is best to gather information from a reputable source for nutritional information.



- ❑ Look into any dietary requirements that may change as your chinchilla ages.
- ❑ Create a feeding schedule and keep it near your pet's cage. Make room on your chart for any change in the amount of food you give it.
- ❑ Track your chinchilla's weight weekly to see if it stays the same or changes.
- ❑ Experiment with different "treats" for your chinchilla. Document your pet's preferences of treats and how the treats affect its mood.

### Handling and Grooming

- ❑ Research how to properly handle a chinchilla so you and your pet enjoy your encounters.
- ❑ Keep a journal about how you bond with your new chinchilla. Describe activities in which you both take part, and describe your pet's attitude about its new surroundings. Start a timeline to document important events.
- ❑ Create a display that describes the signs of a relaxed or frightened chinchilla. Use pictures or drawings to provide visual cues.
- ❑ Document a routine your chinchilla has when you give it a dusting pan.
- ❑ Explore when and how often chinchillas need to be groomed and bathed. Describe possible issues that might arise if you don't groom your chinchilla.

### Health Care

- ❑ Document the medical records for your chinchilla. List visits to the veterinarian, diseases, treatments, and concerns about your chinchilla's health.
- ❑ Make a list of common diseases that typically affect chinchillas. Also list their symptoms. Include internal as well as external diseases.
- ❑ Learn the external parts of your chinchilla. This will help you communicate with a veterinarian or someone else when you discuss your pet.
- ❑ Document some of the signs of an unhealthy chinchilla so you can be on the alert in case you see any deviation from the norm for your pet.

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### SOURCE

Miller, Lucinda, and William Stanforth. *Small Animals Resource Handbook*. The Ohio State University, 2005.

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### RELATED RESOURCE

eXtension. *Chinchilla Housing and Care*. [articles.extension.org/pages/55733/chinchilla-housing-and-care](https://articles.extension.org/pages/55733/chinchilla-housing-and-care).



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