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Feeding Your Pet Chinchilla

Nutrition plays a major role in keeping your pet chinchilla healthy. Fiber is of the utmost importance in preventing gastrointestinal upset and dental problems, two of the most common health issues plaguing the pet chinchilla.

The chinchilla is a medium-sized rodent whose original habitat included the semi-arid, rocky slopes of the Andes in present day Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. Chinchillas are known for their thick lustrous, fur coats, which enable them to thrive at the cooler mountain elevations of 10,000-15,000 feet.

By studying chinchillas in their natural environment, we know that they eagerly seek out berries, herbs, and cactus fruits, as well as high-fiber foods such as grasses and the bark of small shrubs and bushes.

Natural Behavior

In order for nutrients to be extracted, chinchilla's diet requires a large volume of food intake and prolonged chewing, both of which are important factors in maintaining the chinchilla's gastrointestinal and dental health. In captivity, it has been shown that chinchillas ingest most of their food at night and are selective feeders: when given the choice, they will select the most tender, succulent plant parts first. If not controlled, this high-energy, lower-fiber intake will lead to obesity.

Based on our dietary knowledge of the wild chinchilla, together with studies measuring the nutritional intake of the pet chinchilla, it has been determined that the pet chinchilla does best on a diet composed of free choice (available all the time) hay and a small daily ration of pellets. This diet meets the chinchilla's fiber and energy needs without causing obesity.

These nutritional requirements can be fulfilled by feeding your pet chinchilla with:

Free-choice grass hay

Western Timothy

Oat

Orchard

Brome

1-2 tablespoons Oxbow Chinchilla Deluxe pellets

By providing extra energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals, Chinchilla Deluxe pellets play an important role in ensuring the nutritional balance of your chinchilla's diet.

Digestive Health

In addition to meeting nutritional requirements, the high-roughage diet of the chinchilla is critical in helping to prevent two of the most common health disorders seen in these animals: dental disease and gastrointestinal disease. We can mimic the chinchilla's natural high-roughage diet by feeding hay as the primary food source.

Like the rabbit and guinea pig, the chinchilla is a hindgut fermenter, meaning it digests much of its food in the cecum and colon (large intestine), which make up the end of the digestive tract. In the chinchilla, the cecum (appendix in humans) is a large blind-ended sac located at the junction of the small and large intestine. Inside the chinchilla's cecum, specific bacterial populations aid digestion of foods.

Fiber is necessary for these bacterial populations to stay in balance and function properly. Fiber also stimulates gastrointestinal motility, which allows ingested food to move along properly for normal digestion.

Without fiber, the gastrointestinal tract slows down, resulting in changes in cecal pH, fermentation capabilities, and microorganism populations. Over time, these disruptive changes can result in various forms of chinchilla indigestion: gastrointestinal stasis, constipation, or diarrhea.

Health Concerns

GI Stasis

The chinchilla with gastrointestinal stasis will be anorexic or have a reduced appetite and will produce very small stools or none at all. The chinchilla with constipation will strain to defecate, and the few fecal pellets passed are thin, short, round, and occasionally bloodstained.

Diarrhea

The chinchilla with diarrhea may or may not have a reduced appetite and will pass soft stools that frequently mat the fur around the anus. Again, these forms of chinchilla gastrointestinal upset are commonly associated with inappropriate diets –diets that contain excess amounts of grains, seeds, and/or fresh greens without sufficient roughage or fiber.

Dental Disease

Dental problems, such as malocclusion, molar root overgrowth, and molar spurs, are also common in chinchillas. As in the rabbit and guinea pig, all of the chinchilla's teeth grow continuously. Improper wearing of teeth secondary to a diet low in fiber and the lack of suitable chewing materials can result in sharp points on the upper and/or lower molars, resulting in painful ulcers on the cheek and/or tongue.

The chinchilla with dental problems often has a depressed appetite, and you may observe food dropping from its mouth as it attempts to chew. Irritation from the molar spurs may also cause increased salivation, which results in a wet matted chin (a syndrome also known as "slobbers"). Providing plenty of free choice hay ensures a normal chewing pattern, thus encouraging normal dental wear.

Fiber

Chinchillas can thrive on either grass or legume hay. Veterinary nutritionists and clinicians usually recommend feeding an assortment of grass hays free choice and mixing in alfalfa hay if desired (at a 50:50 ratio), for variety and increased levels of protein and calcium. Oxbow Pet Products timothy, orchard, oat, and alfalfa hays are always fresh from the farm.

Pellets

When it comes to feeding a concentrated ration, we recommend alfalfa-based pellets that contain more than 18% crude fiber and a minimum of 10% protein. Oxbow Pet Products' Chinchilla Deluxe provides a good balance of fiber, protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals and is the pellet diet of choice for your pet chinchilla.

As a general rule, we recommend feeding 2 tablespoons (30 grams) of Chinchilla Deluxe to each adult chinchilla on a daily basis. The quantity of Chinchilla Deluxe fed to growing, pregnant, or lactating chinchillas should be increased to approximately ½ cup or more per day. Conversion from a seed/pellet mixture to this highly palatable pellet is usually simple, but a gradual conversion over a period of one to two weeks is recommended in order to prevent digestive upset.

Treats

Treats such as fresh vegetables or herbs can be offered but should be fed in limited quantities. A diet containing too many vegetables can result in diarrhea and gastrointestinal upset.

Feed no more than ½ cup of herbs or leafy green vegetables for your chinchilla each day. Some suggestions include:

Mint
Basil
Oregano
Thyme
Romaine lettuce
Butter crunch
Red leaf lettuce
Cilantro
Carrot tops
Dandelion greens

Feed the same foods consistently in order to prevent digestive upset, and avoid gas-forming vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower.

Water

Water is a fundamental necessity for the domestic chinchilla. Although city drinking water is adequate for chinchillas, excessive chlorine can be very dangerous. If tap water has a strong disinfectant smell, it should be aired in a wide receptacle for 24 hours, or filtered water should be offered. High quality bottled water is preferable to chlorinated drinking water.

It is obvious that nutrition plays a key role in keeping your pet chinchilla healthy. Fiber is of the utmost importance in preventing gastrointestinal upset and dental problems. Offering your chinchilla a continuous supply of timothy hay, mixed with alfalfa hay if desired, is one of the best ways to ensure adequate fiber intake. Be consistent with the amount of Chinchilla Deluxe fed and the type and quantity of treats offered. Your chinchilla's digestive tract thrives on consistency, and your reward will be a pet that is active, bright, alert and healthy.

Peter G. Fisher, DVM ~ Pet Care Veterinary Hospital