



## Chinchillas! What, Where, and How

What, Where, and How

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=zeZbqXQIGLA>

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Jessi: Chinchillas are some of the cutest fluff balls ever! They're so cute and spunky that some people love keeping them as pets. But many people don't know the story of how these super-soft adorable rodents came to live in human homes. What is a chinchilla? Where do they come from? And how do you take care of one in captivity? We're delving into the what, where, how of chinchillas.

(Intro theme plays)

Jessi: Let's start with what they are. This is a chinchilla. Chinchillas are in the class Mammalia and they have ever growing incisors which means they're a rodent, or in the order of Rodentia. This order includes rats, mice, and hamsters. But it also includes beavers, porcupines, and squirrels. Since this is a pretty wide variety of animals, it doesn't really tell us what a chinchilla is, so let's continue classifying the chinchilla. They belong to the family Chinchillidae which means a small to medium rodent with large ears, a bushy tail, strong back legs, and extremely soft and thick fur. This family consists of chinchillas and their close relatives, viscachas. We can further define chinchillas into their genus, Chinchilla. There are two species in the chinchilla genus: the shorter stockier species, often called the short-tailed chinchilla and it's easy, Chinchilla Chinchilla. The second species is the one we're most familiar with, Chinchilla Lanigera. And they are often called the long tailed chinchilla. They're smaller but they have longer tails and bigger ears.

Cheerio is getting a little bit hot so we're going to go ahead and put her back. So, now that we know what a chinchilla is, let's talk about where they come from. A group of rodents in the parvorder Caviomorpha came to South America and began adapting and evolving into many specialized species. Chinchillas were part of this group, and they are perfectly adapted to the high altitudes of the Andes mountains. They're crepuscular, quick, and agile. They can easily jump 4 ft high and their large ears help detect approaching predators. Their large whiskers help them to find and eat scrub plants, grasses, seeds, and sometimes bark. And their digestive track is well adapted to this diet high in fiber, and low in fats and sugars. Their fur keeps them warm, despite the frigid temperatures. And it's so thick, that it can actually prevent parasites like fleas and mites from taking up residence. Each of their hair follicles can contain up to 80 hairs per follicle. I mean, humans have a lousy one hair per follicle and cats can only get up to four. Their fur isn't just dense, it's super soft. It's considered the softest fur in the world, and is highly sought after for clothing.

Which, brings us to the human factor in the chinchillas history. Chinchillas have been hunted for their fur as far back as records of them go, starting with the native people of the Andes, the Chincha. The Chincha people and culture was absorbed by the Incan empire but their namesake lives on in the chinchilla which translates to "Little Chincha." Chinchilla fur was among the most rare and expensive fur in the world. It can take up to 300 chinchillas to make one single full length coat. Fast forward to the late 1800's. Chinchillas had been hunted for centuries, but recent decades of over hunting had led to severely diminished wild population. Because of their unique and valuable fur several attempts at breeding in captivity began. Through dedication and perseverance the captive population eventually increased to several hundred. But at the same time the wild population plummeted. By 1929, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia had all enacted laws to protect the now endangered species. Unfortunately, strict enforcement of the laws weren't seen until the 1980's. Despite decades of protection, the wild chinchilla populations have yet to adequately recover and both species are currently in a significant decline and both are critically endangered in the wild.

Most of the chinchillas taken from the wild and bred in captivity were of the species Chinchilla Lanigera. However, some of them

were Chinchilla Chinchilla making our domesticated species a possible hybrid. Although chinchillas were originally bred for their fur production, breeders eventually started breeding them as pets and that brings us to our current relationship with the domestic chinchilla. And since we've already learned what they are and where they came from, let's talk about the best known practices for how to give them a happy and healthy life in captivity.

All captive care of animals should take into consideration the animal's native environment and natural behaviors. Chinchillas evolved to survive and thrive in the sparse and rugged environment of the Andes mountains. While it's not practical or possible to achieve the high altitude or exact habitat, it is important to consider the animal's native environment and natural behaviors. Let's start with their diet. It's easy to want to show your love for a pet by giving them lots of treats! But for chinchillas, treats are the easiest way to harm their delicate digestive system. Remember they are adapted to sparse, high-altitude vegetation. So a diet high in fiber is crucial for a healthy gut.

Fresh, high quality hay should always be provided and I recommend Timothy hay. Compacted pellets are important for providing the rest of their needed nutrients. Chinchilla pellets are specifically formulated for chinchillas and usually consist of pressed alfalfa. Other pellets contain lower levels of protein or higher levels of other supplements, so pellets intended for other animals should never be used. If you want to offer your chinchilla a treat, keep it to a minimum, and I mean minimum! One raisin is over their sugar allotment for the entire day. Knowing this, I would not recommend purchasing one of the chinchilla mixes sold in pet stores which often contain raisins. Chinchillas will often pick out the tastiest pieces and avoid eating any of the healthy pellets altogether. For one chinchilla I recommend one to two tablespoons of high quality chinchilla pellets and a handful of Timothy hay everyday. And of course access to fresh water should be available at all times.

Now, let's talk about their habitat. Chinchillas have a sensitive respiratory system and enclosed spaces can easily cause an infection. Never use an aquarium or a solid-walled enclosure. Always use an open, wire enclosure, the bigger, the better. Chinchillas are active! They love to run and jump from platform to platform. Provide a multi-level enclosure and access to a running wheel. Offer ledges and other places for them to just hang out, and give them plenty of places to hide and toys to chew on. Temperature is also important. Chinchillas can quickly overheat in temperatures just over 75 degrees Fahrenheit. You can help keep them cool by providing a marble slab where they can lay down and chill out.

Chinchillas are social animals - providing companionship is definitely going to improve their well being. However it can prove challenging in captivity because chinchillas are also quite territorial. For the best results chinchillas who grow up together are going to make the best companions. So, consider getting two if you're purchasing a chinchilla as a pet. Though I'm a big advocate for adopting a chinchilla from a rescue. If you have an older chinchilla keep in mind that females are more dominant than males and can often seriously injure new coming chinchillas. I put a link in the description below for details on introducing older chinchillas.

Lastly, let's talk about interaction. They can be pretty picky about how they want to be handled, and most don't like to be restrained, or held around their body. Cheerio is one that is opposed to that way of handling. And we both prefer that she has more free range when being handled. I pick her up and then quickly set her on my open hand and let her perch on my arms or shoulders. I never allow her to jump off on her own. If I feel like she's in a precarious position, I gently navigate her back to my open palm. When we're done interacting she's gonna want to clean herself off by rolling in



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her dust. This is essential for the health of her fur. Since it's so fine and dense, she never wants to get it wet. Instead she's going to coat it in a fine layer of dust, separating each individual hair. Chinchillas are amazing animals, and they can make a good pet, for the right person. They are sensitive in many ways, so care must be taken to attend to all of their special needs. Thanks for watching and I hope you find the natural history of chinchillas as interesting as I do. If you'd like to go on an adventure with us every week, subscribe to our YouTube channel Animal Wonders Montana. If you have any questions for me or Cheerio, you can leave them in the comments below, we'll see you next time.

(Outro theme plays)

Jessi: Vet visits. Going to the veterinary can be a stressful event. You can make it easier on them by taking them in their crate so essentially they are surrounded by a bubble of safe.