

COMMON DISEASES OF PET CHINCHILLAS

What are some of the common diseases of pet chinchillas?

Common conditions of pet chinchillas include bite wounds, respiratory diseases, overgrown teeth, diarrhea, and heat stroke.

What are the signs of these diseases?

Bite wounds are common in chinchillas that are housed with other chinchillas. They can also occur as a result of an attack by the household cat or dog. Dog bites can be fatal to chinchillas due to the difference in the size of the pets (a large dog can quickly kill a chinchilla). Bites by other chinchillas, dogs, and cats are often infected with various bacteria, especially *Pasteurella*; left untreated, the infection in the wound can easily spread throughout the body.



Respiratory diseases are often seen in pet chinchillas. The respiratory problem can easily progress to become pneumonia, which can be fatal. Conditions such as overcrowding, poor ventilation, and high humidity may predispose to pneumonia. Common signs include lack of appetite, lethargy, difficulty in breathing, nasal discharge, and swollen lymph nodes.

As is true with many rodents, overgrown teeth are common in chinchillas. The teeth of chinchillas grow continuously throughout life. Either the front teeth (incisors) or back teeth (molars) can overgrow. Signs of overgrown teeth include drooling ("slobbering") and a depressed appetite; overgrown incisors are easily noticed upon inspection of the mouth. It is often difficult to tell if the molars are overgrown; anesthesia, to allow a thorough evaluation of the mouth, and radiographs (X-rays) may be needed to identify this problem.

Diarrhea is not a disease but rather a sign of disease. Rodents, being pets whose digestive system is designed to digest a large amount of fiber, easily develop diarrhea due to changes in diet, incorrect usage of antibiotics, stress, and diets low in fiber or high in fat and protein. The correct diagnosis is made after diagnostic testing including microscopic fecal examinations, cultures, radiographs (X-rays), blood tests, and exploratory surgery.

Heat stroke, a common problem in many rodents, also occurs in chinchillas. Being normal inhabitants of the Andes Mountains, they are very comfortable at temperatures of 35° – 45° (2° - 7° C). Temperatures above 80° (27° C), especially if high humidity is also present, can easily lead to fatal heat stroke. Signs of heat stroke are similar to those seen in any pet with this problem and include panting, high body temperature, open-mouth breathing, and recumbency with reluctance to move.

How are chinchilla diseases treated?

Bite wounds are usually infected with any of several different bacteria and can be rapidly fatal. Bite wounds to your chinchilla are a true medical emergency that requires immediate veterinary

attention. Bite wounds are treated with the appropriate antibiotics, as well as thorough wound cleaning (anesthesia may be necessary).

Pneumonia and other respiratory problems are treated with antibiotics. Chinchillas that are lethargic and have stopped eating require aggressive therapy in the hospital; fluid therapy and force-feeding may be necessary.

Overgrown teeth are trimmed by the veterinarian. Anesthesia is often necessary to prevent injury to the chinchilla. In the past, nail trimmers were used to trim overgrown teeth. However, due to the chance of injury to the teeth and the jaws, the teeth are now often filed with a Dremel tool, which causes less injury to the teeth.



The correct treatment of diarrhea depends upon the cause. Parasites are treated with the appropriate deworming medication. Bacterial infections are treated with antibiotics. An inappropriate diet is corrected by switching to a high fiber diet.

Heat stroke is an emergency condition requiring immediate treatment. The chinchilla is immediately cooled with ice packs, cold water enemas, various medications, intraperitoneal fluids, and intravenous fluid therapy. Chinchillas that are discovered with heat stroke at home should be immediately cooled by the owner; applying cold water to the chinchilla and ice packs to the armpits, groin, and neck of the pet will help lower the pet's body temperature. Owners should avoid giving their pets medications such as aspirin or Tylenol; alcohol applied to the chinchilla's skin actually decreases the loss of heat from the body and is not recommended.

How can I tell if my chinchilla is sick?

Signs of disease in chinchillas may be specific for a certain disease. Often, signs are vague and non-specific, such as a chinchilla with anorexia (lack of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases including pneumonia, overgrown teeth, cancer, and even kidney or liver failure. ANY deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.