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THE NUTRITION OF THE CHINCHILLA

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This contribution is meant to obtain basic data for feeding chinchillas (ingestion behavior, feed and water intake) kept as companion animals.

The chinchillas ingested more than 70 % of their total feed intake during the dark phase (highest level of activity between 9:00 pm and 7:00 am). Daily amounts of feed intake varied between 2.5 (fresh grass) or 2.6 (hay) and 5.5 (pelleted complete diet) g of dry matter per 100 g of body weight. An offered mixed feed based on native components led to a selection of individual ingredients (high palatability: carob, beet pulp, sunflower seeds). The chinchillas' daily water intake varied between 30 (mixed feed in briquette form) and 40 ml (alfalfa cubes) and amounted on average between 1.5 and 3 ml/g of dry matter. Compared with rabbits or guinea-pigs, the chinchillas generally showed noticeable

differences (rhythm of feed intake, palatability of individual ingredients, capacity for digestion, etc.) which must be considered in order to optimize the nutrition of this species. (Petra Wolf – University of Veterinary medicine Hannover, 2017).

Chinchilla nutrition is basic and straightforward, they do not need fresh vegetables added to their diet the way that rabbits and guinea pigs do. Always introduce any dietary change slowly and discontinue treats until the change is complete. When adding something to their diet only add one new thing at a time; for instance, let your chin's digestive system adjust to a new type of hay or treat before introducing another.

Chinchillas are herbivorous rodents with teeth that all grow continuously. In captivity they are commonly affected by dental disease. Skulls from wild-caught chinchillas showed minimal evidence of dental disease and the teeth were all short, cheek tooth lengths averaging 5.9 mm. Cheek tooth lengths in zoo specimens (average 6.6 mm), clinically normal (average 7.4 mm) and captive bred animals with dental disease (average 10 mm) were significantly elongated by comparison ($p < 0.0001$), (David A. Crossley and Maria del Mar Miguélez, 2019).

Grinding and chewing course hay also keeps continuously growing teeth filed down, preventing molar spurs and other dental problems, like overgrowth and malocclusion. Be aware that there will always be a little waste with hay and as chins are selective feeders they often go for the soft, leafier parts before the stalk. Therefore, it's important to leave the stalk in for a day or two (as long as it's still clean and fresh) to allow the chin the opportunity to finish consuming it.

1. Herbs can be offered in amounts of about 1-2 teaspoons, 3-4 times a week. Rose hips, in particular, are a good treat to offer because they are high in vitamin C and that helps prevent dental disease by strengthening the connective tissue which holds the chin's open-rooted teeth in place.

2. Every chin should receive additional vitamin C because it strengthens the connective tissue around their open-rooted teeth, and chewable vitamin C tablets every other day can be served as a treat. Chins that are calcium deficient or pregnant/ nursing should have access to additional calcium in the form of more alfalfa hay, which is high in calcium, or additional calcium from sources such as calcium chews.

3. Vitamin and mineral pellets (Calf Manna, Total Enhancer, Animax) should be limited to ½ teaspoon of pellets given 3-4 times a week at most on a temporary basis, do not overfeed, these are high in protein and excessive protein can cause liver disease. Exotics specialists vet advises only occasional access (1-2 times a week) to mineral wheels, stones, or blocks (attach to the cage with wire, not plastic). When supplementing a chin in need of extra vitamins/ minerals, such as pregnant/ nursing or poorly chins (underweight, malnourished, ailing), always check hay and pellet analysis first to see what they're already getting, don't overdo it.