

## Chinchilla factfile

Chinchillas are soft-furred rodents with strong hind legs, large ears and a tail which makes up about one third of their body length [1].

Chinchillas originate from the barren, rocky slopes of the Andes Mountains of South America [2].

Chinchillas in the wild are endangered as they have been hunted for their pelts to near extinction [3].

Insight into the biology and behaviour of chinchillas can help you to understand your pet better, so check out our amazing facts!

### 1. Chinchillas are adapted to a mountainous environment

- Wild chinchillas are adapted to living in rock crevices or holes at elevations over 4000m [4].
- Chinchillas have exceptionally dense fur which is an adaptation to the cold temperatures they are exposed to in their native environment [4]. Each hair follicle has 60 to 90 individual hairs emerging from it [5]; humans typically have one hair per follicle [6]!
- Hairless fleshy footpads allow chinchillas to be agile and maintain their grip on rocky surfaces [7].
- Chinchillas' red blood cells can take up more oxygen than other rodents or rabbits, which helps them survive at high altitudes [8].

### 2. Chinchillas are prey animals

- Chinchillas are prey animals and their natural response to a perceived threat is to freeze or cower, and dart for cover. In captivity they will often try to wedge themselves into a tight space for protection, mimicking their natural behaviour to seek cover in rock crevices [9].
- Chinchillas are able to lose large patches of fur; a process called 'fur slip'. This is a defence mechanism against predators, which results in the predator being left with a tuft of fur while the chinchilla escapes. Fur slip can also occur in captivity due to inappropriate handling [10].

### **3. Chinchillas are athletic**

- Chinchillas have long hind limbs which are adapted for leaping. They can jump over six feet in height, and pet chinchillas have been reported to jump onto the top of refrigerators [13]!

### **4. Chinchillas are highly social**

- Chinchillas are highly social and in the wild live in colonies of more than 100 individuals [14].

### **5. Chinchillas communicate vocally**

- Chinchillas are generally quiet animals and communicate through a variety of soft high-pitched grunting noises [15]. They produce hiccupping noises, chirps, squeals and barks which act as social messages to other chinchillas [16].

### **6. Chinchillas hear like us**

- Chinchillas have large ears and sensitive hearing. Their hearing range is similar to that of humans [11].
- Chinchillas are easily startled by sudden loud or unfamiliar sounds [12].

### **7. Chinchillas need a high fibre diet**

- Wild chinchillas eat leaves, stems, bark and seeds [19]. Captive chinchillas need a high fibre diet based on grasses and hays [20].
- Chinchillas' teeth grow constantly. They need to eat lots of hay, which is abrasive, to help wear their teeth down [21].
- Chinchillas feed in the early morning and late evening [22].
- Chinchillas eat by sitting on their haunches, holding the food in their forepaws [23].

### **8. Chinchillas have an unusual digestive system**

- Like rabbits and guinea pigs, chinchillas perform a digestive process called caecotrophy to extract as much goodness as possible from their food.
- Food is passed through the gut and special droppings, called caecotrophs, are produced. Chinchillas eat these caecotrophs, allowing the food to be reingested [24].

## 9. Chinchillas sleep in the daytime

- Chinchillas are most active in the evening and at night. Chinchillas sleep during the daytime [25].
- Chinchillas do not burrow, but live in rock crevices or holes in the wild [26]. As a result, chinchillas will sleep whilst squeezed into very small spaces. They usually sleep upright in a huddled position, but will also sleep on their sides and can even sleep upside down [27]!