

Is a Chinchilla Part of the Rodent Family?

Chinchillas are cute pets that look like a cross between a squirrel and a mouse. This is because chinchillas, just like both of these animals, are rodents. Their characteristics are in perfect alignment with all the qualities of a rodent.

Animals are classified as certain types based on certain physical and behavioral traits that are specific to them. Once you know what these traits are, it is easy to see why a chinchilla is deemed a rodent—even though they do not look exactly like a varmint that people usually deem rodents as.

Rodent Characteristics in Chinchillas:

Animal classifications start broad and then become more specific the closer one gets to defining one, specific animal. For example, chinchillas are a part of the Rodentia order, but their family is actually Chinchillidae, and mice and squirrels have their own family classifications. Even though this Order is split into many different families, all animals that are deemed rodents all share these typical traits, which are what make chinchillas identifiable as rodents:

1. Terrestrial, dry habitats.

Terrestrial habitats sound more detailed than they are, but this term simply means they live on land; chinchillas are not aquatic animals. Chinchillas that are not domesticated and turned into pets are usually found in regions like the Andes Mountains, where the terrain is cooler and has many rocky spots under which to hide and burrow with their fellows. They are not usually found in climates that are wet, humid, or swampy—which is why they have dense fur to protect themselves, as many rodents do.

2. Razor-sharp incisors and back molars.

An animal's teeth and mouth structure are an easy way to identify if they are a rodent, for they have a specific arrangement to best accommodate their diet. Chinchillas belong to the Hystricomorpha group of rodents, which are designated based on the structure of their mouths. These rodents have upper and lower incisors located at the very front of the mouth, like buckteeth. They also have molars, which are located at the back of the animal's mouth. They do not have canines between these two types of teeth, but they have a gap between them—called a diastema.

For chinchillas, this gap leads to a vestigial cheek pouch—a space that, at one point, probably allowed for the chinchilla to hoard its food in its mouth. Many rodents, like rats and chipmunks, have active cheek pouches even today, but modern chinchillas do not have need to hoard their food, so they evolved until that pouch was practically useless. However, this pouch-like space off of the diastema is still a tell-tale sign of a rodent.

3. Constantly growing teeth.

A rodent's teeth are constantly growing, so they like to gnaw and chew on things like wood to keep their teeth filed down and sharp enough to cut through tough plant materials. Their teeth have many layers of enamel that allow them to remain sharp, but this also allows for their teeth to grow all the time.

However, if their teeth are not regularly filed down, a chinchilla's teeth can easily overgrow, causing complications that may leave them unable to chew and needing veterinary intervention. The worst possible scenario would be if their front incisors become so long, the lower incisors

begin to cut into the roof of the animal's mouth, which runs the danger of piercing through their skull.

Chinchillas, and all other rodents, need things like toys made out of wood to chew on to keep their teeth naturally filed down.

4. Omnivorous rodent diet.

Most rodents have an omnivorous diet—meaning they eat both plant and animal matter. A chinchilla does not usually hunt other small rodents, of course, but they are known to occasionally snack on an insect or bird egg in their wild habitat. In domestic settings, chinchillas usually eat seeds, grains, and vegetables, just like most other domestic rodents.

Rodents have a fairly consistent diet due to their digestive tract's inclusion of the caecum. This organ helps digest the sugars and fibers found in tough plant matter as it houses the bacteria capable of doing so.

5. Nocturnal/ crepuscular sleeping patterns.

Not all rodents are exclusively nocturnal—meaning they do not only sleep at night. However, many of them tend to sleep more during the day and are more active in the hours surrounding dusk and dawn—therefore, crepuscular.

Chinchillas are dominantly crepuscular—but each animal's sleeping habits depends on their own personality. They will sleep through the deadest parts of nights, most of the time, but when the sun begins to rise, they are ready to start the day. Then, at high noon, you will probably find them taking a nice nap in a patch of shade in their cage.

6. Thick bodies, short limbs, and gripping hands.

Rodents are built to roam dominantly land surfaces, and their squat bodies allow for them to easily maneuver through grasses and over woodland terrain. Typically, the front limbs are bent at an elbow for flexibility—especially for rodents like chinchillas that naturally live in rocky areas and have to climb.

The front limbs of rodents usually have four or five digits, accompanied with an opposable thumb for grabbing food, while their back legs typically have three to five digits, depending on the animal. Chinchillas do not have opposable thumbs, but they can still grip things with their front hands for eating and grabbing toys and such. Their “feet”—back limbs—have four toes to support their hopping and climbing around.

7. Long, wiry whiskers.

While fully nocturnal rodents typically have great vision, chinchillas do not. They have long whiskers that act as their eyes to help them with spatial awareness and depth perception. They are not blind, but their whiskers are essential for their living. All rodents have whiskers for this reason, even if they do not rely on them as heavily as chinchillas do.

8. Keen senses of smell and hearing.

Some chinchilla owners describe their pets as too sensitive when it comes to sounds, but that is because a chinchilla’s range of hearing extends farther than a human’s. They can also hear higher pitches than a human. This is due to how a chinchilla communicates—they chirp and bark to speak to members of their herd—which, auditory communication is another characteristic of a rodent—and a human cannot always hear these sounds.

A chinchilla's sense of smell is strong, but that doesn't mean you need to worry about your perfume overpowering them. It simply means they can smell you from across the room or house without much difficulty. In the wild, this helped them detect predators and sniff out food, so it is a useful sense to have for them.

9. Sexual dimorphism.

Most rodents show significant differentiations between the sexes in several ways. For chinchillas, the females tend to be physically larger and more aggressive about territory and more protective. This is also typical of the hystricomorphic family, which chinchillas are part of.

Chinchillas as Pet Rodents.

Chinchillas are fairly easygoing pets, but because they are rodents, they have a few requirements when it comes to their care—especially because they are still considered to be an exotic pet. Overall, as a point of comparison, treat chinchillas much like you would a hamster or a pet mouse.

1. Be aware of their cage specifications.

Chinchillas run on the bigger side of rodent sizes—at least, usually bigger than a mouse. Therefore, because rodents and especially chinchillas are relatively active animals, research what size cage you should get before you buy a cage for a chinchilla. You do not want to buy a cage too small for this animal because they love to jump, run, and explore around their cages. Chinchillas typically do best in cages that are relatively larger and have different levels through the area, as well as places to hide and burrow should they feel the need.

All rodents require some form of bedding or substrate in their cages to absorb messes and urinary habits. For chinchillas, bedding sheets tend to work best, as more common substrates like

woodchips can be too sharp for their sensitive feet—plus they are easier to change during cleaning.

2. Do not place them in direct sunlight.

Rodents like to burrow, and as it's been stated, they like to sleep during the day. Therefore, be wary of your placement of their cage, so it is not in direct sunlight for a large portion of the day. The direct sun is instinctually not the best for them, so keeping them in front of a window is not advised—just keep them in a well-lit room and that should be fine enough!

3. Watch the temperature is not too extreme.

Rodents are warm-blooded animals, so they naturally tend to maintain a higher body heat than their surroundings, which means they adapt best in domestic situations when there are moderate temperatures. If your home is too cold, your chinchilla may burrow and hide to conserve its energy and not freeze—even though they have thick fur meant to combat their natural habitat.

On the other hand, if your home is too warm, it is very easy for your chinchilla to overheat—especially due to their thick fur. Chinchillas, just like most rodents, need moderate temperatures to live optimally.

4. Watch their intake of seeds and fresh vegetables.

While chinchillas have a rodent's diet—in which seeds and vegetables are tasty snacks for them—it is possible for them to have too much of a good thing. If they have too much fiber or too much water, it can overload their small systems and cause digestive sicknesses, like diarrhea.

It is okay for chinchillas to have these things, of course, but make sure they are dominantly gaining their nutrients from their food pellets that are made specifically for them. But, also make sure they have plenty of water throughout the day to accompany the nutrients.

5. They must have dust baths.

Most rodents are not meant to have sudsy, water baths too regularly—they are not aquatic animals. But to keep themselves clean, they need to be given the opportunity to have a dust bath at least once a week. This is simply when you place a bowl of dust on the ground, place them in it, and let them roll around in the dust until they have fulfilled their fun.

A dust bath is not just for their enjoyment, because it helps absorb the oils and excess dirt from the chinchilla's fur, leaving them clean—by their standards. If they are not given a weekly—or even biweekly—opportunity to have a dust bath, they will stay dirty and oily, which is not very enjoyable for them.

6. They are not for kids.

While rodents are sometimes said to be ideal for children because they are relatively independent, easy to clean up after, and small, chinchillas are the exact opposite. Chinchillas require more attention than other rodents—like mice, gerbils, or even squirrels—and they are not meant to be played with via being held.

If there are small children around chinchilla, it is best to have intense parental supervision, because it is very easy for kids to harm the small rodent. Chinchillas do not have ribcages, and kids do not always know their own strength. Not only that, but they like to roam around with their owner just paying them attention—kids are too grabby for a chinchilla's tastes.

All in all, chinchillas are easy pets to take care of. While they may not look exactly like a mouse, they are relatively just like them in genetic makeup and behavior. It is easy to treat them like the typical rodent they are and treat them well enough, but keep in mind that each chinchilla will have its own personality and needs.