

The National Chinchilla Society's Guide to Breeding Chinchillas



Brevicaudata & Lanigera

NCS

Why join the National Chinchilla Society (NCS)?

Membership of the NCS allows you to exhibit at the shows that take place all over England and in Scotland. You will receive 5 gazettes per year that are full of articles, including ones on health, breeding and exhibiting and lots of top tips on all aspects of husbandry and care. You can draw on the expertise of the society's members, most of whom are always very willing to help. You can apply online via the website or contact the National Secretary, Paul Spooner (Tel.01457 856945 Email: paul@paulspoonerchinchillas.co.uk).

Please note that with breeding animals, the normal husbandry and care guidelines also apply, please refer to "The NCS Guide to Keeping Chinchillas as pets".

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Where to Source Your Breeding Chinchillas?

It is important when you decide to breed chinchillas that you source suitable animals. Closely related chinchillas (siblings, 1st cousins etc) should not be bred together. Rescue chinchilla and animals bought from pet shops without a known background should also be avoided. Ideally, find a reputable breeder who is able to provide you with strong, healthy animals with known backgrounds and preferably with pedigrees. (Note: A pedigree is neither a guarantee of quality nor of health, it merely tells you how the animal is bred). Most importantly, the chinchillas you breed with need to be healthy, of adequate size/age and from healthy lines (e.g. with no genetic disposition to malocclusion etc.). Breeding with unsuitable animals will significantly increase the risk of having complications during pregnancy and the birthing process, as well as producing unviable litters. Remember, the male contributes 50% of the genetics to a kit, so as much care must be taken selecting the male as the female.

If you wish to breed for exhibiting and show, purchase the best quality animals you possibly can. The best way to do this is to attend National Chinchilla Society (NCS) shows to learn what qualities are desirable, there you can talk and meet with experienced breeders and also have a chinchilla you are interested in buying, or have bought, assessed. Please note that the NCS does not inspect breeders and just because a breeder is a member of the NCS, does not mean they are producing show quality or healthy animals. Even if you do not intend to exhibit, it is still worth attending a show and joining the NCS since this makes available to you a wealth of knowledge and experience and gives you a possible source of good quality, healthy animals.

Any chinchilla you breed with, needs to be healthy, bright eyed, active and at least 10 months old. Females need to be a minimum of 650g and preferably 700g plus when they are put into breeding, otherwise, birthing difficulties are likely to occur.

Methods of Breeding

Various methods of breeding can be adopted (i) pair breeding i.e. a male and female in 1 cage (ii) group breeding – 2 or 3 females with 1 male in 1 cage (iii) polygamous breeding – up to 6 females in individual cages with collars and 1 male who also has his own cage but who can go between the cages via a tunnel and enter the female's cage through a pop hole (the collar prevents the females from accessing the tunnel).

Chinchillas require a period of introduction and you need to ensure there is no aggression between them. With polygamous breeding the male should be allowed to “run over” the female for a number of days before you open the pop hole to allow the male access. With pair or group breeding it is usual to “smooch” chinchillas before putting them in their permanent cage together. “Smooching” involves keeping them in close contact in a very small cage until there is no aggression between them. This should be done for a number of hours a day until you are certain that they have accepted each other (this can take anything from 1 day to several weeks). Mounting each other and nibbling around the ears and neck is normal, aggressive behaviour involves biting and standing on their rear legs and squirting urine. The first few days of them being in their permanent cage it is advisable to have a tunnel or something similar in the cage so that if there is aggression, the less dominant animal can hide and protect itself.

The Breeding Process

Chinchillas do not necessarily breed quickly. The females have an oestrus cycle of approximately 30 days; however, they will not necessarily be receptive to the advances of the male. Normally, you can expect to have to wait for anything from one month to six months before the animals' breed. In particular, with inexperienced males, there is often a lot of chasing as the male is frequently ready to mate with the female before she will accept him. The males, when courting the females, often wag their tails and vocalise, and several mating's



can take place in a 12-hour period. A sign that a mating has occurred is a breeding plug. This is a white waxy plug expelled by the female and which normally ranges in length from 1 to 2 cms long. These breeding plugs dry out quite quickly and harden and yellow. However, finding a breeding plug does not guarantee a pregnancy (although this is usually the case) and not finding one does not mean a mating has not occurred. Make a note of the date of any breeding activity and then 111 days later (it normally

does not vary by more than 2 to 3 days either side of this) you will hopefully have a litter.

Preparation for a Litter

Ideally, prior to the due date, the female should be in a cage of her own or the pop hole in a polygamous system closed. Males are unlikely to harm new born kits, however, once the female has given birth, she will be able to mate again within 12–72 hours. This is known as a breed back. A breed back puts additional strain on the body of a nursing female and comes with the risk of kits being trampled during the mating process.

Cages for expectant mothers should be made with mesh no larger than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch (2cm). New born kits can and will escape from cages with mesh larger than this. It is preferable to have no shelves in the cage and for the cage to be no bigger than 24 x 24 inches (60 x 60 cm) and no higher than 16 or 17 inches (c.40cm) tall. This is because in large cages the female may decide to give birth in different parts of the cage and shelves allow the mother an escape route from the kits. This could result in abandoned kits that could chill and die. A healthy kit will naturally gravitate towards its mother and a small cage allows them to do this without expending too much energy. At just a few hours old, many kits are able to climb up the mesh of the cage and with tall cages, this increases the risk of them injuring themselves when they fall backwards. With chinchillas, the kits have to follow the mother rather than the mother going to the kits. In general, chinchillas can cope with low temperatures, but new born, wet kits cannot. If they are to be born where there is a danger they could chill (anywhere likely to be fall below c.15°C), a heat pad should be provided for the birth to help them to dry out quickly. The heat pad should not cover the whole floor area, so the kits and mother can move away from the heat if they get too hot. A birthing cage should have any area with newspaper, fleece or a heat pad, to provide a comfortable environment for the female to give birth and for the kits to feed.

The Birth Process

Depending on the size of the litter, the females begin to be noticeably pregnant after around two months of pregnancy (although some hide it well!). The belly becomes hard and some 2 or 3 weeks away from giving birth, it may be possible to feel or see the kits move. However, whenever possible it is advisable to avoid handling a pregnant-female since this can result in reabsorption in the early stages of pregnancy and miscarriage in the later stages.

Sand baths should not be left in the cage as the due date approaches, just in case the female decides to give birth in it. Kits are normally born between the early hours of the morning and mid-morning. The female will become restless and may frequently sit on her hind legs and dip her head down towards the vagina. They will then begin to push, many arch their back as they do this. This stage can last from anything from 5 minutes to an hour, although most kits are born within 20 – 30 minutes. With multiple births, the kits can be born as little as 30 minutes apart or it may be hours. They are born head first, although occasional they are breech.

The kits are born fully furred with their eyes open and should be moving around the cage within hours of birth. The average litter size is just under two per litter but can vary between a single kit and quads (larger litters have been born, but this is rare). Their weight at birth can vary enormously, but it is usually between 40g and

60g. The size of the litter tends to impact on birth weights. The kits can be sexed at birth. The female will pass a placenta for every kit born. The passing of the placenta is the stage that normally results in the female having a bloodied front, but the female should not be passing blood and any excessive bleeding is a cause for concern.

The First Few Days

The kits should be dry and under mum within an hour of birth and be capable of walking around the cage within 2 or 3 hours. The female chinchilla has six nipples, however, the most milk is produced in the front two and very little from the back two. The mother's milk can take a day or two to properly come in, so it is not unusual for a kit to lose a couple of grammes within the first 24 hours, thereafter, their weight should start to increase. If the kits are not thriving or fighting breaks out, there may be a need to supplement mother's milk. If in doubt, offer milk. The usual recipe is 50:50 previously boiled water to evaporated milk, fed through a pipette at body temperature. Fighting amongst kits, which often happens with litters of triplets or more, is dangerous and can result in badly injured or even dead kits. If the mother has inadequate milk going forward, it may be necessary to continue supplementing or if it is an option, to foster one of the kits to a female with a single kit of a similar age. A well-fed kit is able to move freely around the cage and has a curly tail. A hungry or ill kit will sit hunched, away from the mother. It is best to withhold the sand bath for c. 3 days after the birth since this is thought to reduce the risk of infection in the female.

As the Weeks Go by

Weight gain can be slow in the first week, but week two onwards a kit should put on approximately 25g a week. Many kits start nibbling at hay and pellets from c.2½ weeks onward. If you are still supplementing mother milk when the kits are this age, they may take the milk from a shallow bowl. Kits are normally weaned from their mother at 8 weeks old. They should then be kept for at least another 4 weeks before they are rehomed to ensure they are still gaining weight and are healthy.

The key to Successful Chinchilla Breeding

- Using suitable animals
- Appropriate housing
- Correct diet, chinchillas need a quality pellet with sufficient protein and vitamin levels to sustain a pregnancy and to produce viable young that they can feed.

Things that can go Wrong

- Few kits born below 30g will survive
- Some kits are born unviable and die within the first few days
- Chilled new born kits – to try and revive them hold the body (not head) in hot water. This often results in apparently “dead” kits coming back to life.
- A mother with insufficient milk – either help by hand feeding or foster to a suitable female

Things that can go wrong which require Medical Intervention

- A kit may become stuck during the birth process, be it because the kit is too large, the mother too small or a kit is breech.
- If after giving birth the female starts losing a lot of blood, medical attention is required.
- The female develops a blockage or bloat either within days or a few weeks after giving birth. This is sometimes caused by eating the placentas, hence why it is vital that the output of faeces is monitored.

Remember Chinchilla Breeding is not without its challenges, but can be a very rewarding and fulfilling hobby. Join us today!