



Basic Care of Guinea Pigs

Housing

Guinea pigs do not climb or jump well and therefore can be kept in open bins, large aquariums, or any other type of safe, easily cleaned container. If housed in open enclosures the sides should be at least 10 inches high. Also, be

sure other family pets, such as dogs and cats, are not a threat.

Enclosures made of wood should not be used due to difficulty in cleaning and susceptibility to destructive gnawing. Many plastics are also easily destroyed by gnawing. Ideally, the enclosure should have one open side for adequate ventilation. In addition, the cage should be free of sharp edges and other potential hazards. At least two square feet of floor space should be available for each guinea pig.

Cage flooring can be either wire or solid. Wire mesh flooring provides a cleaner environment and easier maintenance, but

may result in injuries to the feet and hocks. Housing on wire over long periods of time can result in footpad and hock infections from abrasive rubbing on fecal soiled wire. To reduce the incidence of these

problems, provide a solid platform as a resting place in one area of the

cage. Broken legs are common in guinea pigs that fall through the wire mesh. Although solid flooring requires more effort to keep sanitary, it is safer for the guinea pig.

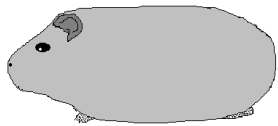
Bedding materials must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust free and easy to replace. Acceptable beddings are pine wood shavings, shredded paper, processed ground corncob, and recycled paper litter.

Make sure the ground corncob is properly processed to reduce fungal spore problems. Cedar shavings should NOT be used since they

have been associated with causing respiratory difficulty and liver disease in some guinea pigs. Sawdust should also be avoided since it tends to accumulate within the external genitalia of male guinea pigs causing an impaction. Cages should be cleaned and sanitized at least once weekly. Bleach diluted 1:32 makes an excellent disinfectant if used after cleaning and if rinsed off well.

Guinea pigs do not tolerate high or low temperature extremes and should be kept at 65-75 degrees. Likewise, the humidity must not be too high or low; 40-70%

humidity is recommended. Guinea pigs are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement and



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Special points of interest:

- Keep in clean safe cage when not supervised
- Feed hay, limited pellets, and high fiber vegetables
- Supplement vitamin C to diet
- Spay or neuter
- Annual checkups
- Handle carefully
- Trim nails regularly

Diet

There are complete pelleted diets formulated for guinea pigs. However, these diets were developed for guinea pigs that were used in research. The diets support maximum growth rates but probably are not ideal for longevity, gut function, and overall health. The guinea pig's intestinal tract is highly specialized for digesting fiber. When inadequate fiber is given, intestinal motility is reduced, the wrong types of bacterial flora proliferate, and toxins may be produced. Impactions (i.e. hairballs), diarrhea, enterotoxemia, and other disorders may result from the excessive feeding of grains (i.e. pellets, seeds, cereals, and breads). Additionally, pellets have higher levels of protein and calcium than is necessary for adult guinea pigs. While a growing pig (less than 4 months old) may be fed unlimited pellets, it is advisable to limit the pellets of adults. Adults should be restricted to 2 tablespoons of pellets daily, otherwise, they may become obese.

Do NOT feed rabbit pellets as a substitute for guinea pig pellets. Unlike rabbits, and most mammals for that matter, guinea pigs require a high level of folic acid and vitamin C. Guinea pig

diets are uniquely formulated with these requirements in mind, whereas rabbit pellets are not.

Unlike most mammals, guinea pigs

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cannot manufacture their own vitamin C; therefore, they need to get it from an outside source. Pelleted guinea pig diets are supplemented with vitamin C, however it is very unstable. Fresh pellets lose about 1/2 of the vitamin C content due to degradation within 6 weeks of manufacture. For this reason, it is recommended to provide supplemented vitamin C to the diet. This can be done by adding 200 mg of vitamin C in one quart of drinking water. Another way to supplement vitamin C is by offering vegetables high in vitamin C (turnip greens, mustard greens, dandelion greens, kale) or fruits high in vitamin C (citrus fruits). Carrots and lettuce are not good sources of vitamin C. Fresh produce with high

Vitamin C content should be offered at 1/2 to 1 cup daily. Always thoroughly wash all fresh produce to avoid exposing your pet to pesticide residues or bacterial contamination.

In addition to the pellets, high quality grass hay such as timothy should be given ad libitum (as much as they want). Grass hay is preferred to

alfalfa since it is lower in protein and calcium.

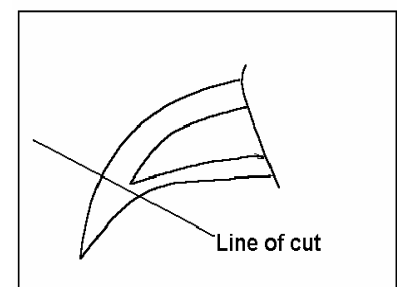
Food should be offered in a dish suspended an inch or two above the bedding. Food offered on the bottom of the cage may be soiled by droppings or urine. Heavy ceramic bowls are recommended because they resist tipping and chewing. Guinea pigs are very finicky and may refuse food if the type of food or the container is changed. Any change in the diet should be made gradually. Finally, water should always be available in sipper tubes and should be changed daily. It is very important that all food and water containers be cleaned and disinfected daily.

Grooming

Most guinea pigs will do most of their own grooming. They keep their fur clean and maintain themselves well. There are a few things they may need help with however. The first is trimming the toenails. Once every 4-8 weeks, it is a good idea to trim the tips of the nails. If the nail is clear, the quick can be seen as a pink area within the nail. Dark nails are more difficult. The quick should be avoided. Have one of our staff show you how to trim the nails.

If you do this at home, you should have some styptic powder or cream available. Nicking a quick is not life-threatening, but it can be messy and it does hurt the guinea pig. Often, a horny growth is present extending from the foot pads. Consult your veterinarian prior to trimming these.

Brushing, bathing, or ear cleaning may be required under certain circumstances.

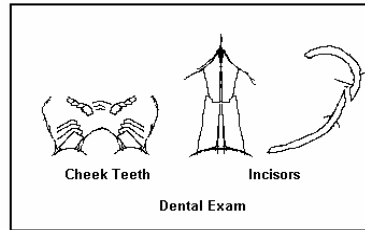


Veterinary Care

In order to maintain the health of guinea pigs, it is important to determine the presence of any problems. Since they are adept at masking the signs of illness, regular examinations are a valuable addition to preventative care.

New guinea pigs should be examined soon after they enter the home. At this time the veterinarian can establish the current health

status of the guinea pig and give recommendations for husbandry.



Routine veterinary care may help identify potential problems early and treat them successfully

After this initial examination, annual examinations should be maintained to monitor for early problems. Problems detected early can often be treated much more easily and effectively.

Handling

Generally, guinea pigs are docile, non-aggressive animals. They rarely bite or scratch when handled. They usually voice their protest simply by letting out a high-pitched squeal. They may, however, struggle when being picked up or restrained. Extreme care should be taken not to injure them during handling. They should be approached with both hands. One hand is placed under the chest and abdomen,

while the other hand supports the hindquarters.

Children and other pets should be closely supervised around guinea pigs. Aside from outright injury, guinea pigs can become stressed by the erratic movement of some animals and children.



Breeding

Breeding guinea pigs is relatively easy since they are social and males and females can be kept together. However, several factors must be kept in mind. Homes must be found for the 2 to 4 babies.

Females (sows) should be bred between 4-6 months of age. After this time frame, the guinea pig may not be able to deliver babies normally. The reason for this is that the pelvis of the guinea pig fuses at this early age, which narrows the birth canal, preventing the babies

from passing easily. Overweight sows often will develop pregnancy toxemia. Males (boars) should be at least 4 months of age before breeding.

The length of pregnancy is 59-72 days. The time of delivery is difficult to assess due to the relatively long gestation period and lack of nest building. An uncomplicated delivery usually takes about ½ hour with an average of 5 minutes

Females should be bred between 4-6 months of age to prevent the need for a c-section.

between babies. Unfortunately, abortions and stillbirths are not uncommon.

The young are born fully furred, with eyes open and able to eat solid food. It is recommended to allow them to nurse for 3 weeks before weaning.

If breeding is not desired, males can be neutered and females spayed to avoid unwanted litters and other potential diseases associated with reproductive tract.

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Guinea Pig History

The guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*) is a domesticated version of the wild cavies of the Andes Mountain area of South America. They were first domesticated by the Andean Indians of Peru, who used them as a food source and as a sacrificial offering to Incan gods. During the 16th century, Dutch explorers introduced guinea pigs to Europe, where fanciers selectively bred them. The guinea pig entered the research laboratory in the 18th century, and has since made significant contributions to the scientific community.

There are five basic varieties of guinea pig. The most common is the English or shorthaired variety characterized by uniformly short hair coat. Abyssinian guinea pigs have rough looking coats, which are arranged in whorls. Peruvian guinea pigs have extremely long hair. The Silky guinea pig is a larger variety distinguished by its medium length silky hair coat. The Teddy Bear guinea pig is characterized by medium length hair of normal consistency. These last 2 varieties are encountered less commonly.

Guinea Pigs are very social and gentle animals, making them very good pets. They rarely bite or escape from cages, are not difficult to care for, and may live 5 to 7 years. They are most active at dawn and dusk (crepuscular). Some guinea pigs engage in a behavior known as stampeding, which involves running wildly around the perimeter of the cage. Barriers used to inhibit this type of behavior may cause injury to young pigs. When overcrowded, guinea pigs may chew the hair of others (barbering).