

Guinea Pigs

This web page contains basic information for the care of guinea pigs. For more detailed information, please consult other professional resources such as your veterinarian or one of the many books available about guinea pig care.

The guinea pig (or cavy) is a member of the rodent family with an average life span of 4 to 7 years. These sociable, somewhat skittish creatures are easy to care for, seldom bite and are exceptionally clean.

Wild guinea pigs are a prey species and their domestic counterparts retain a desire to run for cover when startled or threatened and so it is necessary to provide a shelter in their cage where they can seek safety. Since they do not climb they are easy to contain in a habitat and are easily located should they run free.

Guinea pigs must chew to wear down their constantly-growing front teeth, so you need to provide chew items such as apple, birch or willow branches, hay and/or firm vegetables such as carrots.

Guinea pigs are social animals, so it is best if they live in pairs. Usually sows (females) cohabit well as either siblings or mother-daughter pairs. Boars (males) will sometimes get along but they often do not unless raised together.

Boars should not be placed with sows under any circumstances even for a short period. Please do not breed guinea pigs. It is more difficult than you might think to find good, long term homes for the offspring. It is possible to have guinea pigs neutered but there is some risk involved - consult a veterinarian specializing in small animals.

Tips for how to care for your guinea pig

Housing

The guinea pig habitat can be a simple arrangement with walls 30 cm. high, open on top and having a minimum floor area of 3,000 square cm (approx. 2ft by 2ft.). More space is needed for a pair of guinea pigs. The enclosure should be made of wood, plastic or metal with a solid floor and the bedding should be white wood shavings (not sawdust or cedar shavings).

A nest box or house must also be provided. Change the wood shavings regularly to keep the cage clean, dry and healthy. Make your habitat larger if you have room. Place interesting items such as small cardboard or wooden boxes or tubes for your guinea pig to dart into.

Keep your guinea pigs in a dry area protected from cold drafts and direct sunlight. Guinea pigs cannot tolerate excessive heat. Guinea pigs prefer living in temperatures in the same 18-25°C (65-75°F) range people do. Guinea pigs require exercise and will happily romp around a room that has been cleared of hazards such as electric cords, cats or dogs and poisonous plants.

If you observe your guinea pig chewing on the bars of her cage or exhibiting any unusual repetitive behaviour - this is not normal! Your guinea pig is bored and frustrated. Provide your guinea pig with a more stimulating environment by providing more items to chew on, a larger habitat, more out of cage exercise time or more time socializing with the family.

Food and Water

Guinea pigs are herbivores, meaning they eat only grasses, vegetables and fruit. Provide twice daily an assortment of foods (4 or 5 types) such as carrots, peas, apples, green peppers, spinach, pears, dandelion leaves, clover, romaine lettuce, red leaf lettuce, cucumbers, celery, melons, beet tops and parsley. Food preferences vary from guinea pig to guinea pig. Also, guinea pigs tend to become habituated to certain foods from a young age so provide a variety of foods and continue over time to reintroduce foods previously ignored. Do not feed iceberg lettuce, cabbage, beans, potatoes, rhubarb or chocolate to guinea pigs (or rabbits), the latter three can be toxic.

Your guinea pig's basic diet should also be supplemented with pelleted commercial feed. Fresh pellets are vital to guinea pigs as they are enriched with vitamin C which guinea pigs (like humans) cannot synthesize. Purchase fresh pellets in small quantities, never keeping pellets on hand for more than a month. Place the food in heavy plastic or ceramic bowls that won't easily tip, one bowl for pellets and one for fresh food.

Plastic sipper bottles are best for water. Be sure the nipple is low enough for the smallest guinea pig to reach. Change water daily, and weekly clean and disinfect water bottle and food dishes.

Hay is also important for your guinea pig, adding fibre to the diet. Hay should be fed daily and in abundance. Compressed bales of hay can be purchased at pet stores or purchased directly from farmers or from country feed stores.

If your guinea pig is not fed enough fruits or vegetables or if the pellets are not fresh, he or she may become deficient in Vitamin C. Vitamin C may be added to your guinea pig's diet through the water. Dissolve 200 mg of Vitamin C per litre of drinking water in your pet's bottle (this should not be necessary if you are feeding plenty of fresh foods).

Handling

Always use two hands to pick up your guinea pig. Be sure one hand supports the rump and hind legs. Guinea pigs like to be cuddled but must be handled gently and carefully. A nervous guinea pig may jump from your grasp, a common cause of broken legs and backs. Hold your guinea pig while you are sitting down, preferably on the floor, so that the animal will not be injured if he or she does fall. Support your guinea pig with a towel on your lap - guinea pigs sometimes have "accidents." Do not allow your guinea pig to walk around on table tops or couches because guinea pigs will most certainly wander too close to the edge and fall.

Grooming/Nail Trimming

Long haired breeds should be brushed regularly with a soft brush. Baths can be given to guinea pigs. Line a sink with a towel or rag and bathe your guinea pig in a sink half full of lukewarm water. Use a mild pet shampoo only (do not use soaps or shampoos designed for people). Rinse thoroughly, and dry with a towel. A hair dryer set to a warm setting can also be used.

Nails need to be trimmed about every six weeks or as necessary. Consult a vet or knowledgeable person for instructions if hesitant. Care must be taken to avoid cutting the blood vessel in the centre of the nail. In good light this vessel is clearly visible. If accidentally severed use a product called "Quick-Stop" (available at pet stores) to stop the bleeding.

Medical Problems

Guinea pigs are susceptible to respiratory viruses and catching one could be fatal. Your veterinarian should be consulted if you notice diarrhea, difficulty in breathing, hair loss, excessive water drinking, lack of activity or appetite or anything else you think is unusual. Injuries due to falls or other accidents should be treated by a veterinarian immediately.

SYMPTOM	POSSIBLE CAUSE (CURED AT HOME)	MORE SERIOUS CAUSE (CONSULT VETERINARIAN)
Listless	Boredom (add more items to habitat; more attention to animal)	Possible infection
Doesn't Eat	Environment too cold and/or damp; draft; overheating; not enough to gnaw	Teeth are too long or possible malocclusion (upper and lower teeth meet improperly when chewing).
Drooling	Not enough to gnaw	Teeth too long or a malocclusion
Diarrhea	Eating large amount of foods high in water	Bacterial infection

SYMPTOM	POSSIBLE CAUSE (CURED AT HOME)	MORE SERIOUS CAUSE (CONSULT VETERINARIAN)
	(i.e., iceberg lettuce, cucumber); not enough hay; environment too cool or damp	
Sneezing or throat rumbling	Draft; temperatures too hot or too cold	Viral or bacterial infection
Rapid breathing	Panting due to high heat, shock, fear, or stress	Heat stroke
Excessive scratching	Unclean maintenance; poor grooming; fleas or mites	Parasites (fleas or mites); skin fungus; skin inflammation
Slight bleeding	Minor wound or scratch from fighting with rival; sharp object in habitat	Clean minor wounds with antiseptic; for severe cut see veterinarian
Bare spots in fur	Poor diet (more fruits and vegetables)	Deficiency disease (Vitamin C deficiency); fungal skin disease
Sore on foot pad	Housing with wire bottom; fecal soiling of cage bottom (cleanliness)	Abscess on ball of foot

*Based on the health chart in Katrin Behrand's Guinea Pigs: A Complete Owner's Manual

More Information

This information is meant to provide minimum care guidelines for guinea pigs. Learn more about guinea pigs by consulting your veterinarian and/or one of the many care books for guinea pigs available at book stores, pet stores or your public library. Look for ones that describe nutrition, health issues, nail clipping and guinea pig behaviour.