

GUINEA PIG CARE

OF ALL THE LITTLE CRITTERS, GUINEA PIGS ARE POSSIBLY THE GENTLEST AND MOST MANAGEABLE, making them very popular pets. It appears that they originated in South America as wild rodents and were introduced to Europe in the 16th century. Also known as “cavies,” they’re larger than hamsters but smaller than rabbits, and they generally live for five to seven years. One of the guinea pig’s most endearing traits is her tendency to whistle and squeak when excited by someone coming into the room or offering a special treat.

HOUSING

Many factors must be taken into consideration when preparing proper housing for a guinea pig:

- The minimum space recommended for a *single* guinea pig is 2’ x 2’ x 2’. However, more space must be provided for any additional guinea pigs.
- Guinea pigs have very delicate feet, so wire-bottom habitats should not be used unless something, such as ceramic tile, is put down as flooring to keep their feet from getting caught in the wires.
- Never use a glass aquarium because of the poor ventilation that it provides.
- Always keep the habitat indoors away from drafts and extreme temperatures. Guinea pigs are most comfortable at temperatures between 64° and 68° Fahrenheit.
- The floor of the habitat should be lined with wood shavings or another form of safe bedding. Do not use cedar or pine chips – the oils they contain and the strong aromas they give off can be dangerous to your guinea pig. Be sure to change the bedding often enough to keep it dry and odor-free. Typically, this will be at least once or twice a week but may vary depending on how many cavies you keep. It is possible to train a guinea pig to use a litterbox, but the process is a slow one and a great deal of patience is required!
- Like any animal that is prey in the wild, guinea pigs love to have places to hide. Be sure to place cardboard tubes or a hideaway house in the habitat. Guinea pigs should be allowed free run time every day, but limit your cavy to one room that has been carefully checked for any openings from which he can escape, get lost or possibly be injured. Guinea pigs must be supervised when they are loose because they will chew on anything in their paths – including electrical wires!

DIET

Guinea pigs’ bodies do not produce their own vitamin C, so it is essential for you to provide your guinea pig with the necessary amount. Most guinea pigs love oranges, so supplementing your cavy’s diet with a piece of orange will not only meet his dietary needs; it will also serve as a tasty treat! You can also offer other foods high in vitamin C such as kale and strawberries. Keep in mind that commercial guinea pig pellets are generally supplemented with vitamin C, but rabbit pellets are not. Therefore, buy *only* guinea pig pellets.

Your guinea pig may enjoy other kinds of fresh, raw fruits and vegetables, including apples, bananas, broccoli, carrots, green bell peppers, parsley, spinach and tomatoes. Dark, leafy greens are best; however, **rhubarb and raw beans should never be given as they are extremely poisonous to guinea pigs.** Make sure to clean up any leftover fresh food before it spoils. Various hays, such as Timothy hay and meadow grass, are tasty treats that will promote a healthy digestive system in your cavy. Finally, fresh, clean water should be available at all times. Weighted water dishes tend to fill quickly with debris from the bedding, so for best results, use an inverted bottle with a drinking tube, and change the water daily.



GENERAL CARE

Guinea pigs' teeth grow continuously, just like those of all other rodents. So, it is important for you to give your guinea pig a piece of wood that she can gnaw on to wear her teeth down. It's best to provide a tree branch that has not been treated with pesticides or any other chemicals, but any small piece of unpainted, untreated wood will do. Pet supply stores sell a variety of safe "chew sticks."

Guinea pigs are very conscientious about grooming themselves, but brushing them on a regular basis will help keep their coat clean and remove any loose hairs. Long-haired guinea pigs should be brushed daily to prevent tangles and knots from forming. In addition, you'll need to regularly trim your cavy's nails.

Guinea pigs are social animals that prefer to live in small groups. In fact, guinea pigs adhere to a very strict dominance hierarchy where there is generally only one mature male in a herd. As such, **adult male guinea pigs tend to fight and should never be kept together, unless they are neutered.** In contrast, several females can usually be kept together without problems.

Because guinea pigs, like all rodents, multiply rapidly, keeping males and females together is not recommended unless the males are neutered OR the females are spayed. In fact, spaying your female may prolong her life. If she does not breed before the age of 9 months, her hip bones begin to fuse and future pregnancies could become life-threatening.

VETERINARY CARE

A sick or injured guinea pig should see a veterinarian immediately. The following are the most common afflictions and injuries seen in guinea pigs:

- *Scurvy* – Scurvy generally happens as a result of a vitamin C deficiency (see Diet section for more on this). Symptoms include hair loss, eye infections, and pneumonia.
- *Mites & Lice* – These are tiny, microscopic insects that feed off of a guinea pig's natural body fluids. Symptoms of a mite or lice infestation include excessive scratching and hair loss.
- *Respiratory Distress* – Dusty bedding or cold drafts are often the causes of respiratory infections in guinea pigs. Symptoms include sneezing, runny nose and a possible clicking noise in the back of the throat during breathing.
- *Injuries* - Guinea pigs have virtually no depth perception, so they have a difficult time judging distances and heights. It is not uncommon for a guinea pig to become severely injured by falling off a table or jumping out of hands.

FUN FACTS

- Guinea pigs do not come from Guinea and they are not pigs. In fact, the origin of their name is a bit of a mystery. One theory suggests that they were brought to Europe *by way of* Guinea and called "pigs" because of the noises they make. Another theory suggests that, when Dutch traders brought the guinea pig to Europe, it was the "closest thing to a pig that you could get for a guinea."
- Unlike hamsters and mice, domestic guinea pigs are NOT nocturnal – which means they won't keep you up at night and will be happy to play at any hour of the day!
- Squeaking and grunting are generally signs of contentment; but beware any rumbling or teeth chattering – this means your cavy is upset!
- Guinea pigs can see color, particularly reds, yellows and blues.
- Guinea pigs often enjoy music!

For more information, please visit azhumane.org.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado ©2006 Arizona Humane Society

