



Living with Companion Guinea Pigs



Guinea Pigs As Pets

Guinea pigs never cease to amaze and amuse their owners. Guinea pigs make excellent pets for adults and children (older than 6 years old). They are quiet, clean and require little care; however, they do need a lot of person-guinea pig interactions and socialization to be optimal companions. These furry friends are trainable and very responsive – especially for their favourite treats. Through various sounds, such as purring, grunting, and squealing, a guinea pig will always greet you, ask for food, and hold up a terrific conversation.

Please note that children should never be left as the sole providers and caregivers of any pet. Guinea pigs are easy to care for, but they require proper and adequate nutrition and careful handling (young children may drop these little critters). Always supervise children when interacting with guinea pigs.

Description

Guinea pigs are also known as cavies. These flamboyant little rodents are neither a pig nor from Guinea. They originate from the

mountains and grasslands of South America: Venezuela, Peru, and Brazil. Cavies come in a variety of shapes, colours and coat lengths. There are three breeds of guinea pigs that are normally kept as pets. The most common breed is the 'English'. They have straight, fine, short fur. Peruvian guinea pigs have really long, straight silky hair, which requires much care to maintain. Some guinea pigs have rosettes of fur, and these are known as Abyssinians. Recently, a new variant of the cavy has emerged. The "nude" or hairless guinea pig has gained much popularity with allergy sufferers.

Guinea pigs can grow up to 2 lbs, with the females weighing slightly less than the males. They can live from 5 – 7 years and some up to 10 years.

Cavies are nonaggressive and rarely bite. They enjoy being cuddled and adjust very well to their environment. Guinea pigs are easily startled and owners must be aware not to make loud noises or fast sudden movements around them.

The males are known as boars, females are sows and the young are called pups. The pups are born precocial, meaning that they have lots of fur, and open eyes when born. When these little critters are excited, they will jump about, throw their heads up and buck (also known as 'popcorning').

Younger guinea pigs are easy to

train and take a little less time to acclimatize, while older ones may take a little longer to get used to a new surrounding, but may already be socialized.

Guinea pigs are herd animals and do like to have a friend or two. However, this is not necessary if the cavy will have enough attention and socialization from people in the house. If more than one guinea pig is desired, having all the same gender is best to avoid the complications of pregnancy and offspring. Usually, two females, either the same age or an adult and a baby get along the best. Males may do well together depending on their personalities, but may have to be neutered or separated if fighting occurs.

Guinea pigs do not require yearly vaccinations, but they should have annual check-ups for illnesses or diseases.

Guinea Pig – Proofing

Guinea pigs love to run around and interact with things in the house. Always make sure that all cords or wires are not accessible, because guinea pigs love to chew. Stairs should be closed off and air vents and ducts covered. Any other animals in the house, such as cats and dogs should be supervised during any interactions with a guinea pig. Cages or enclosures should have a roof to provide protection from other pets. Also make sure that any doors are held completely open or are closed,



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because guinea pigs like to investigate behind them and may be caught in a closing door.

Training and Handling

Guinea pigs are very trainable. They pick up many behaviours on their own, such as squealing when they hear the fridge door open, or when they hear a car drive into the laneway. They purr when they are happy and cuddled. They can even be taught to play with objects, run through tunnels and follow a leader.

These little critters can also be trained to use a litter box inside the cage (never use clumping cat litter) by placing it in the guinea pig's selected washroom area.

Housing

Cavies do not require a huge cage, but the larger the cage, the less cleaning, and more exercise and entertainment for the guinea pig. Standard size cages are available from pet stores, but most of these are suitable for only one guinea pig. Add 1 square foot per additional cavy. Keep in mind that the cage should provide enough space for a hiding area, feeding area (pellet dish and water bottle), and an area for voiding. Any cage should have a solid, washable bottom. Wire bottoms cause foot and leg injuries. The sides can be made of wire, and a cover should be provided to prevent other animals such as cats and dogs from entering the cage.

Pine kiln-dried shavings are the best bedding material. A 1-2 inch

lining over the bottom of the entire cage should be provided. Do not use Cedar shavings, because they contain toxic oils, which can lead to respiratory difficulties and disease. In addition, sawdust bedding should never be used, because the dust causes eye irritation and respiratory problems. Corn cob bedding can be used, but is not ideal, as some guinea pigs will eat the bedding, and the corn cob pellets mold very quickly. Yesterday's News cat litter or Cell-Sorb Plus bedding can also be used.

Make sure the cage is placed in a bright, draft free room, at room temperature, 18-23 degrees C. Also, the cage should not be placed in direct sunlight, or too close to a radiator, where the guinea pig may develop heat exhaustion.

On a nice warm, sunny day, you can bring your guinea pig outside. Be sure to have an enclosure that will protect the guinea pig from running away. The grass in the area should be free of chemicals, and animal contamination. Hiding spots and a cover should be provided, if there are other animals around, including birds of prey. Always ensure that the guinea pig is supervised while it is romping outside.

Diet

Guinea pigs are strict herbivores. They have molars and incisors that grow continuously and must be worn down by their diet. For this reason, cavies should be provided with unlimited fresh timothy hay. Alfalfa hay may also be given, but



not as frequently. Pelleted food is available and the cavy should be given 1/8 cup per day for a 2lb. guinea pig. These pellets contain vitamin C and other essential nutrients necessary for a healthy cavy. Rabbit pellets should not be used, because they do not contain vitamin C and they may contain excessive amounts of vitamin D, which is toxic to guinea pigs. Guinea pigs do not make their own vitamin C and therefore must have the vitamin added to their diet. Vitamin C drops added to the water are the easiest way to supplement. However, the vitamin C becomes inactive quickly, especially if in direct sunlight. Therefore, the water must be changed daily and new drops added at each cleaning.

Water bowls or bottles with sipper tubes may be used. Bowls should be shallow, but have a tendency to get contaminated with cage contents rather quickly. Bottles remain cleaner and do not take up extra room in the cage. However, sipper tubes should be checked often to ensure that they are working, because guinea pigs have a tendency to clog the end with food. The bottles should be kept out of direct sunlight, as vitamin C will be diminished and algae may grow.

Pellets should be supplemented with fresh, washed fruits and vegetables, which are another excellent way to provide variation to the diet, and vitamin C. Slices of apples, oranges, strawberries, kiwi, spinach, parsley, romaine lettuce, fresh grass, carrots (including the tops!), cucumbers and tomatoes can be used and also

make tasty treats. All fruits and vegetables should be washed.

The food bowl should be ceramic, stainless steel or hard plastic. These little animals are hardy chewers and they can nibble down the edges of undigestible soft plastic containers.

Health

Guinea pigs have toenails that grow continuously. They require regular clipping to prevent overgrowth. Nail clippers are used to clip the toenail before the 'quick', which is the blood supply to the nail. A veterinarian can demonstrate the proper way to clip guinea pig nails. Styptic powder should be attained in case the quick is cut and bleeding occurs.

Some cavies have tooth problems, and may have to have their teeth clipped on occasion. Always keep track of the length of the incisors, and be sure to provide plenty of chewable foods to help wear down the teeth.

Some guinea pig may require bathing due to skin problems or soiling of long fur. You should consult a veterinarian if you believe a bath is required. A shallow bowl with lukewarm water is ideal. Gentle kitten shampoo can be used. During the bath, support the guinea pig gently with one hand to prevent the cavy from jumping out of the bowl or slipping and injuring itself. Avoid getting water into the guinea pig's eyes or ears. A face cloth may be used on the head to wash the fur. If possible, always try to wash in the direction

of the fur.

Try to monitor what your guinea pig is eating. Any indications of respiratory problems, diarrhea, balding, excessive scratching or weight loss are emergency situations. Sometimes weight loss is the only indication of illness.

A yearly veterinary visit is always recommended to ensure the health of a guinea pig. Cavies are notorious for hiding signs of disease until it is too late.

Guinea pigs and Other Animals

Never house a rabbit and guinea pig together. Some healthy rabbits may host normal bacteria, such as *Pasteurella multocida* that can make a susceptible guinea pig very sick.

Pet birds and reptiles may also make your guinea pig quite ill. Some lizards, turtles, and birds have *Salmonella* as part of their normal bacterial flora. Always wash hands before playing with a guinea pig after handling birds or reptiles. Never use items that were in contact with reptiles or birds for your guinea pig.

Guinea pigs may get along with cats and dogs, but always supervise these interactions. Cavies are considered as prey animals and may be hunted by other, larger household pets, even if they appear to be playing.





Before you Make the Commitment...

- ✓ Guinea pigs will require medical care. Have you planned in your budget for emergencies?
- ✓ If you rent, have you checked to be sure you will be allowed to keep a pet guinea pig?
- ✓ What will you do with your guinea pig during vacation time?
- ✓ Guinea pigs generally live to be 5 to 7 years, and sometimes up to 10 years. Are you prepared for this long-term commitment?
- ✓ Young children should not be left unsupervised with guinea pigs. Will you have the time to spend with your children and their pet? Will you teach them to handle the small animal gently and carefully?

- ✓ Do you have other pets to consider before taking a guinea pig home?
- ✓ A guinea pig sheds. Are there allergies in your family?
- ✓ Will a guinea pig fit into your home and lifestyle?

Checklist

Housing

- Cage (with solid bottom)
- Pellet bowl (ceramic, stainless steel or hard plastic)
- Water bottle or bowl
- Toys
- Hiding area – either box or heavy PCV tubing
- Pet carrier
- Exercise area/ enclosure



Food

- High quality Guinea Pig pellets (**Not** Rabbit)
- Timothy hay
- Fresh water
- Fresh, washed vegetables and fruits
- Vitamin C supplementation

Supplies

- Brush / comb
- Toenail clippers
- Shallow bowl for bathing
- Styptic powder
- Kiln-dried pine shavings
- Toys
- Good book on guinea pig care

Veterinary Care

- Annual exam
- Emergency medical care
- Vacation care

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 *A Common Sense Guide to Selecting a Dog or a Cat*

 *Living with Urban Wildlife* factsheets

- Raccoons
- Squirrels
- Skunks
- Mice & Rats
- Pigeon

 *Happy Indoor Cats* factsheet

 *Giving Your Cat a Safe and Happy Home*

Other companion animal factsheets in this series:

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