

# Care of the Pet Guinea Pig

Native to South America, the guinea pig is a lively, lovable rodent that requires relatively easy care. The most common types of guinea pigs are the English or American shorthair, the Peruvian (long-haired), and the Abyssinian (swirled hair). The average weight of a guinea pig ranges from 500-900 grams (1-2 pounds). The average lifespan of a guinea pig is 5-7 years.

## HOUSING

The cage you choose should be roomy enough for your guinea pig to move around comfortably and still accommodate a hide box. This hide box can range from a simple, untreated cardboard box with holes cut in the side to a commercially available hideaway or igloo. At minimum, the cage should be 0.45 x 0.9 m (18 x 36 in) for one or two animals. The sides of the cage do not need to be especially tall since guinea pigs do not jump very high, however your guinea pig may need to be protected from other household pets like cats and dogs. The cage floor should be solid, not wire. Avoid wood flooring, which allows urine to soak in and is difficult to clean. Any cage selected should also provide adequate air circulation therefore aquarium tanks are not recommended. A commercially available cage with a plastic bottom and a removable wire top is a good choice.

Avoid cedar or pine wood chips when choosing bedding because they contain harmful oils that can irritate the respiratory tract. Safer alternatives include recycled paper bedding or aspen shavings. Guinea pigs are messy. All bedding should be completely changed frequently, and daily spot cleaning is recommended.

Guinea pigs are very social animals and are best kept in small social groups of two or more individuals. Pigs of the same sex usually get along best given appropriate cage space, however males and females can be housed together if at least one of them has been neutered to prevent pregnancy. Groups of sows, or sows with a neutered boar are common. Do not house rabbits and guinea pigs together. Rabbits that appear healthy may carry some infectious agents, like *Bordetella*, that can make guinea pigs ill.

Guinea pigs have very little tolerance for high heat or high humidity, particularly when they are overweight or heavily furred. Set the cage in an area where temperature does not exceed 26.7-29°C (80-85°F) and make sure your pig has adequate exposure to shade and proper airflow.

## ENCOURAGE PLAY & EXERCISE

Exercise your guinea pig outside of its cage under supervision on a daily basis in a guinea-pig safe area or room. Make sure any wires or other chewable items are out of your pig's reach. If your guinea pig cannot be released from its cage, it should be provided with a substantially larger cage.

Regular rotation of toys will keep your guinea pig entertained. Offer untreated paper towel rolls, paper bags, old socks filled with hay, balled up white paper with treats hidden

inside, and chew treats such as pieces of untreated apple wood or willow bark. Large PVC piping can also be offered that allows the guinea pig to hide and play within.

## DIET

Your guinea pig's diet should consist of grass hay, available at all times, as well as small amounts of grass-hay based pellets (2-4 TBSP per adult pig) and fresh vegetables. Avoid alfalfa hay in adult pigs due to its higher protein and calcium content. High dietary calcium can predispose your guinea pig to the formation of urinary stones. Offer only "plain" pellets. Avoid pellets that contain nuts or dried fruit as these are too high in fat for your guinea pig.

Like human beings, guinea pigs are unable to make vitamin C, so they need to be given vitamin C in the diet to avoid serious health problems. Pellets made for guinea pigs include vitamin C, but the vitamin quickly breaks down and becomes ineffective on the shelf so also give your pig vitamin C-rich vegetables (*see table right*). Introduce new food items one at a time and initially offer only a small amount to ensure there are no adverse effects on your guinea pig's appetite or eliminations.

A less ideal way to provide vitamin C is through supplementation (60 mg vitamin C daily). Liquid vitamin C supplements are available at pharmacies and health food stores. Be sure when choosing a vitamin that it contains only vitamin C. Over-supplementation of other vitamins can cause serious health problems in your guinea pig. It is best to directly give the vitamin C supplement to your pig rather than putting it in the water where it is rapidly degraded.

<b>Vitamin C</b>	
<u>Vitamin C content in 1 cup portions of selected foods</u>	
Turnip greens	260 mg
Mustard greens	252 mg
Dandelion greens	200 mg
Kale	192 mg
Brussel sprouts	173 mg
Collard greens	140 mg
Parsley	140 mg
Guavas	125 mg
Broccoli leaf*	120 mg
Beet greens	100 mg
Cauliflower	100 mg
Kohlrabi	100 mg
Strawberries	100 mg
Honeydew melon	90 mg
Broccoli florets*	87 mg
Spinach	60 mg
Raspberries	60 mg
Rutabaga	52 mg
Cabbage	50 mg
Orange	50 mg
*Broccoli stem has 0 mg vitamin C	

## WATER

Guinea pigs tend to drink more water from a water bottle when compared to a water bowl, which is good for urinary tract health. Clean and disinfect bottles regularly. Some guinea pigs will insert a slurry of pellets into the sipper tube, which can make frequent cleaning particularly important.

## HANDLING

The guinea pig's natural curiosity and friendly disposition makes it fairly easy to handle. Most guinea pigs will approach a hand introduced into their cage and can be easily scooped into the palm of the hand. Cup one hand under the rump while cradling the midsection with the other hand. A two-handed hold is always recommended. Guinea pigs unaccustomed to being handled may jump and run, but rarely turn aggressive.

**Safety Tip:** Close supervision of children is recommended to ensure proper handling. For younger children, it is best to place the guinea pig in a towel on the child's lap. Alternatively, the guinea pig can be placed on the floor in a pig-safe area so the animal can be petted without being held.

## GROOMING

Guinea pigs do benefit from regular brushing and care of their coat. They also possess rapidly growing toenails, which should be trimmed weekly or as needed.

## References

Balsiger A, Clauss M, Liesegan GA, *et al.* Guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*) drinking preferences: do nipple drinkers compensate for behaviourally deficient diets? *J Anim Physiol Anim Nutr (Berl)*. 2016 Jul 23. doi: 10.1111/jpn.12549 [Epub ahead of print].

Bradley Bays T. 2006. Guinea pig behavior. In: Bradley Bays T, Lightfoot T, Mayer J (eds). *Exotic Pet Behavior: Birds, Reptiles, and Small Animals*. St Louis (MO): Saunders Elsevier; 2006: 207–238.

Quesenberry KE, Donnelly TM, Mans C. Biology, husbandry, and clinical techniques of guinea pigs and chinchillas. In: Quesenberry KE, Carpenter JW (eds). *Ferrets, Rabbits, and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. St. Louis, MO: Elsevier Saunders; 2012: 279-280, 282.

United States Department of Agriculture. USDA National Nutrient Database: Vitamin C, ascorbic acid (mg) content of selected foods per common measure. Available at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/Data/SR21/nutrlist/sr21w401.pdf>. Accessed on October 4, 2009.

Updated November 18, 2017