



Caring for your Guinea Pig

Guinea pigs come in all shapes and styles from short to long coated, with spots, stripes and solid colors. Their life span is approximately 6 years. They make a great pet for children if handled frequently and gently. They do not require vaccinations or routine worming and have minimal health problems if fed and cared for correctly. The following handout gives you some advice on how to care for your guinea pig.

Diet

Guinea pigs are herbivorous (meaning they only eats plants) and feed mainly at dawn and dusk. Guinea pigs are unable to produce their own vitamin C and therefore have to have a source of this in their diet. Pellets for this species do contain vitamin C but the level reduces with storage time.

A recommended diet for any healthy guinea pig should consist of grass hay and fruit such as pear, apple, melon, grapes, oranges, tomato, and kiwi fruit. Green leafy vegetables as also very good, such as spinach, cabbage, kale, parsley, bok choi sweet corn, cucumber, celery, carrot, capsicum and broccoli. In addition to fresh fruit and vegetables they can also receive modest quantities of guinea pig pellets without sugar or molasses added. The fiber content of commercial guinea pig mixes or pellets should be at least 15%.

Guinea pigs develop preferences for foods early in life and will often stop eating entirely if the diet, presentation, or appearance of their food or water changes. For example, a new food bowl will be enough to stop them eating! For this reason it is important to expose young guinea pigs to a large array of different vegetables and fruits and pellets of different brands and tastes for them to accept them later in life.

Because guinea pigs have continuously growing teeth it is important that they have foods that help wear them down, otherwise they can develop serious dental disease. Feeding large amounts of grass hay helps keep their teeth healthy. You can also give your guinea pig small branches from fruit trees for them to gnaw on (make sure they have not been sprayed with insecticides).

Fresh water should be supplied daily. Make sure they cannot tip over their water bowl. If sipper bottles are used, take care to check they are working every morning. Guinea pigs are well known for spitting chewed up food into the dripper causing them to block!

Housing

The important thing here is to have an enclosure that is easy to clean. Guinea pigs produce large volumes of wastes which end up everywhere! The cage can be made of wood, plastic or wire. Wire flooring should be avoided as this can lead to guinea pigs breaking legs or developing foot wounds. If their cage is wire floored it is very important to provide a washable or disposable floor covering.



Wire flooring should be covered with a deep bed of hay changed 3 times a week or linoleum with shredded paper or hay which can be easily hosed clean. Good ventilation is also important.

Shelter is vital as these animals do not like being out in the open. This may take the form of a deep bed of hay, an upturned cardboard box, or something more permanent.

The cage should be placed in a quiet area away from possible predators such as dogs and cats. Guinea pigs do not tolerate temperatures above 18 – 26 degrees or high humidity and can develop heat stress.

Guinea pigs are social animals so it is best to have more than one. For breeding purposes it is possible to have 1 male to up to 10 females in the same enclosure – provided it is large enough. Overcrowding can lead to stress and aggression between guinea pigs. If you are not intending to breed, have the males desexed or ensure you have all females.

Many rabbits are kept together with guinea pigs. This is not recommended as rabbits are capable of spreading a bacteria called *Bordetella bronchiseptica* to guinea pigs. This organism has no effect on rabbits but can cause respiratory disease and even death in affected guinea pigs.

Things You Need To Know

Female guinea pigs are capable of having offspring at 2 – 3 months of age so take care when buying your guinea pig that she is not pregnant and make sure you separate the males from the females at home.

If you are intending to breed it is advised that the female (called a sow) be bred before 6 months of age for her first litter. This is important because after 6 months of age the sow's pelvis becomes narrower which can cause severe complications when giving birth.

Guinea pig gestation lasts 59-72 days. When giving birth, any straining for longer than 20 minutes without producing a pup is considered a reason for concern. There are usually only 5 minutes between successive births.

New born pups are fully furred, have their eyes and ears open and are able to stand. Although they cannot fend for themselves at this stage. They should ideally drink mother's milk for the first 3 weeks. Pups require the sow's aid with urination and defecation for the first 2 weeks.

Young will begin to nibble at solid food at 2 days of age. It is very important when they are young to offer a huge variety of appropriate food types. Guinea pigs will not eat anything as adults that they did not have access to as young.

Orphaned young – should be fostered onto a lactating sow if possible. If hand rearing is necessary seek veterinary advice.



Long haired guinea pigs require regular grooming. Many will need their nails trimmed every few months as well. It is also advised they receive yearly health checks from your veterinarian. With the correct care and proper diet your guinea pig will live a long healthy life.

This is a picture of “Chip”, a Mini Yak breed at 4 hours of age belonging to our client Nick Daisley. Guinea pigs can be great pets in restricted areas; they do not require vaccinations or routine worming and have minimal health problems.

