



GUINEA PIG CARE

Guinea pigs (*Cavia porcellus*), also known as cavies, originate in the Andean mountains of South America. They are not from Guinea, nor are they related to pigs. In French, the rodent is known as *le cochon d'Inde*, or Indian pig. The name in English is believed to stem from the price (one guinea) of the first animals brought to Britain.

There are three basic types of guinea pig: English or Common (short, straight fur), Abyssinian (coarse hair in whorls) and Peruvian (long, soft hair). The modern varieties of colors and hair coat, stem from these groups.

HANDLING AND BEHAVIOR

Guinea pigs make good pets, rarely biting or scratching. Their temperaments are formed from a young age, however, so it is best that early experiences with people, other pigs and new foods or objects in the environment be safe and pleasant. Guinea pigs live naturally in small groups of perhaps five to ten animals. They are considered “thigmotactic” animals, meaning that they prefer to be in contact with walls, protective objects or other pigs, than to be in a stark, open environment. Solitary existence is stressful for guinea pigs. They are best kept in groups often two or more. Pigs appreciate PVC tubes and hide boxes, as they do not normally like to be too far from protection. It is best to introduce toys and cage furniture from an early age. When frightened, guinea pigs may charge about their enclosure at a considerable speed. This stampeding behavior can result in injury.

Guinea pigs have their eyes placed well back on the side of their heads. This affords them the best possible peripheral vision, and so the best chance of being alerted to the approach of a predator. The shortcoming of this arrangement is that pigs have very poor depth perception and have been known to wander off high surfaces, such as tables or beds. Given these characteristics of the guinea pig, it is best to restrain them by cuddling them close to your body, supporting the animal well with both hands. The nature of the guinea pig is that he is a prey species. Therefore, loud noises and sudden movements easily stress them. Guinea pigs also have a highly developed sense of smell and will be frightened by the smell of cats, dogs and ferrets. Always wash your hands after handling such animals. If you are about to handle a pig, be careful that the pig is not housed within sight or smell of one of these animals.

Guinea pigs can be very wriggly, so it is recommended that young children handle them only on the floor. Pigs will come to recognize their owner's smell. They can be extremely vocal, particularly in response to food related noises: paper or plastic bags, refrigerator doors.

DIET

Guinea pigs vary in their habits, but some are extremely messy. It is important to be sure that your pig cannot defecate in his food bowls. Water bowls or sipper tubes should be cleaned daily. Pelleted commercial guinea pig feed is recommended. Neither rabbit food nor seed is appropriate.



Guinea pigs, like primates, are unable to synthesize vitamin C. While this is added to feeds; the nature of the vitamin is such that it degrades with time and with exposure to light. Because it is a water-soluble vitamin it is difficult to overdose. Vitamin C should be supplemented at about 50 mg. per day per pig. Copper, aluminum and plastic drinking spouts will deactivate the vitamin, as will exposure to light. A darkened bottle, with de-ionized water is best. Alternately, the vitamin C tablet can be crushed on to fresh food, which the pig will relish. Attention to vitamin C is particularly important in the case of pregnant or nursing sows. Guinea pigs should have sane hay available at all times. This provides fiber in the diet, as well as bedding material. The hay should be good quality, that is, not moldy or dusty and not at all coarse. Fresh fruit, and particularly fresh vegetables, should be provided daily, with an emphasis on those high in vitamin C.

Foods high in vitamin C include: turnip and mustard greens, dandelion, kale, parsley, broccoli leaves and florets (not the stem), cauliflower and strawberries. Melon, apple, carrots, orange and raspberries are relatively lower in vitamin C.

In all cases, the level of vitamin C is unpredictable and the pig may well need to consume a huge quantity to meet his requirements, so it is best to supplement regardless. Do not use a multivitamin, as this will lead the pig to consume dangerously high levels of other vitamins in order to take in enough vitamin C. Pellets should be fed in amounts according to manufacturers' directions, with careful attention to the pig's weight. Obesity is a common problem. Hay should always be available and fresh foods should be offered once or twice daily and removed if uneaten. Chocolate drops and other pet treats are not recommended. Guinea pigs are not rabbits and should not be fed as such.

HOUSING

Guinea pigs do not generally jump, so a ground level cage, with low, smooth walls is usually adequate. A wire screen on the top and elevating the cage is recommended if there are other pets in the house. Wire floors are not recommended, as the likelihood of foot and leg injuries is too high. The more pigs there are in the enclosure, the larger it will need to be, with at least 700 cm (9 feet) square area for each pig. Twice this area is recommended for breeding animals. Particularly if the enclosure is relatively small, guinea pigs should be taken out daily for exercise and interaction with owners. Appropriate bedding includes hay, shredded newspaper, pelleted or recycled paper products and wood shavings. Pine and cedar shavings are NOT recommended as they contain oils, which are irritating to the respiratory tract and may, over time, cause liver damage. Bedding should not be dusty. The enclosure should be cleaned every 1 to 3 days, depending on the size of the cage, the number of animals and their habits. A hide box should be provided.

Guinea pigs are susceptible to heat stroke and to respiratory disease, so a well-ventilated cage, which does not receive direct sunlight, is best.



GROOMING AND HEALTH CARE

Animals over 1 1/2 years of age often need regular toenail trims. Longhaired animals may need daily grooming. The anal area should be checked for evidence of diarrhea. We do NOT recommend that guinea pigs be bathed.

Older male pigs may need their genital area checked and cleaned every day or two, as a smelly, waxy material, or sometimes balls of feces may accumulate in the rectal area. This can become very painful.

If a sow is to be bred, this should happen before she reaches 6 months of age. After this time, the pubic symphysis (in the pelvis) will fuse, and the likelihood of a problem birth increases significantly. The onset of labor is difficult to determine, as a nest is not often built. Pregnant sows should be housed separately until the young are weaned, as adult pigs may trample the piglets if startled. Sows can become pregnant within hours of giving birth, and for this reason, also, should not be housed with a boar.

Guinea pigs should not be housed with rabbits, cats or dogs. These species commonly carry a bacterium, which may be harmful to guinea pigs, predisposing them to or exacerbating respiratory disease. Rabbits and guinea pigs often inflict nasty bite wounds on one another, even if they have been housed together, apparently happily for years. The problem is seen particularly in the case of intact (un-castrated) males. Two boar (male) guinea pigs will often fight, and a boar housed with a sow (female) will quickly lead to a large colony. Castration can be considered as a simple solution or preventive measure.

Guinea pigs should be observed and handled daily. Check for any swellings or humps on the body or in the abdomen. Changes in behavior, weight or body condition should be noted. Pay particular attention to the condition of the feet and nails in older or heavy animals. Bumblefoot, a serious and painful swelling and inflammation of the feet, is common.

Discharge from the nose or eyes, as well as a change in the normal breathing pattern, should be addressed immediately. These are common signs of pneumonia or an upper respiratory tract infection. Guinea pigs which do not eat with great enthusiasm, who become picky in their eating habits, who do not get excited about favorite foods or who lose weight should be seen by a veterinarian familiar with guinea pigs as soon as possible. Overgrown teeth are common, and without prompt medical intervention a guinea pig that is not ingesting sufficient calories will experience serious metabolic changes, which will exacerbate any disease condition already present.

It is recommended that all guinea pigs have an annual examination, with a veterinarian familiar with the species.



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IMPORTANT FACTS

Expected Life Span:	4-8 years
Adult Weight (boar-male):	900-1200 G. *
Adult Weight (sow-female):	750-900 G. *
Weaning Age:	2-3 weeks (150-250 G.)
Litter Size:	1-6 piglets
Breeding Onset (male):	3-4 months (600-700 G.)*
Breeding Onset (female):	2-3 months (350-450 G.)*
Gestation (duration of pregnancy):	59-72 days (the larger the litter, the smaller the duration)

***Note:** These weights and ages are only guidelines. The body condition of every animal should be assessed for that individual. It is advisable to separate males from females prior to the expected onset of breeding, as surprises do happen.