

Guinea Pig Care Sheet

UC Davis, VMTH

Companion Avian and Exotic Pet Medicine and Surgery Service
(530) 752-1393

Natural History Guinea pigs are rodents from South America, most commonly known as the cavy (*Cavia porcellus*). Guinea pigs have been domestic pets for over 400 years. Wild guinea pigs today can still be found in Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Pappaguay, and Peru. In the wild they inhabit grasslands, forest edges, swamps, and rocky areas. Domestic guinea pigs are still raised by the Indians of the Altiplanos. The three main breeds of guinea pigs are; English/Common (short, straight, fine hair), Abyssinian (rough, wiry hair in rosettes or whorls), and Peruvian (long, straight, silky hair). Crosses of all breeds results in a wide range of coat colors and patterns.

Special Characteristics

Longevity: 4-8 years (average 5 in captivity)
Adult Weight: Male: 900-1200g Female: 750-900g
Birth Weight: 60-110g
Gestation: 59-72 days
Litter Size: 1-6 (average 4)
Body Temperature: 101.5-103°F
Age at Maturity: Male: 9-10 weeks Female: 6 weeks
Temperament: Cavies make good pets. They are nonaggressive and they rarely bite or scratch. If frightened, they may run around their enclosure at a very fast speed, which makes them hard to catch. Guinea pigs are social animals that seek physical contact with other guinea pigs when housed together. The vocalizations of guinea pigs have been well characterized. Some common call types include; chutt, chatter, whine, tweet, whistle (single or in long bouts), purr, drr, scream, squeal, chirp, and grunt.

Captive Care Requirements

Cage: Guinea pigs require relatively simple housing, due to their messy habits. Guinea pigs produce a large amount of feces, often defecating in food and water dishes, turning over any unstable container, and are known to inject a slurry of half chewed pellets into the tubes of their sipper bottles. A guinea pig should not be housed in anything smaller than 200in² floor space. Cages can be plastic, metal, or wire. Good ventilation is important and is why you should not house your guinea pig in an aquarium. Cage walls

should be at least 10 inches tall, and the top does not need to be enclosed since guinea pigs do not jump or climb. It is recommended the flooring be solid and NOT wire mesh. This will prevent possible foot and leg injuries.

Bedding: Shredded newspaper, and recycled paper litter products should be used for your guinea pigs bedding. Bedding should be changed daily to prevent high levels of ammonia from urine, and large quantities of feces that may contaminate food and water. Pine and cedar shavings should not be used as bedding as the volatile oils given off by these woods may be harmful to your guinea pig.

Water: A sipper water bottle should be affixed to the outside of the cage. The water should be cleaned and filled with fresh water every day and the stopper checked for leaks, pellets, hair and mineral deposit plugs. The water bottles should be thoroughly cleaned with hot, soapy water and bleach at least once per week. Make sure the bottle is rinsed free of all bleach before refilling with water and given back to your guinea pig. A ceramic or stainless steel bowl can be used, but these often get dirty and can be easily tipped.

Temperature: A guinea pig's cage should be placed in a quiet area out of direct sunlight. Recommended environmental temperature is 65-79°F. Guinea pigs tolerate cool temperatures better than heat and should not be exposed to high temperatures and humidity as they are susceptible to heat stroke.

Exercise: Guinea pigs love to play outside of their cages. This can be done in a supervised fashion in a cordoned off area. Guinea pigs love to chew anything. Wires, outlets, and base boards will be chewed quickly and can be dangerous. Therefore, tiled, linoleum, or wood floors without wires and outlets are the safest areas for exercising your guinea pig and make for easy clean-up.

DIET

Pellets: Pellets should be provided daily in a ceramic or stainless steel heavy bowl that is cleaned daily. Timothy-based pellets specifically for guinea pigs should be provided. Alfalfa-based pellets should be avoided as they are too high in calcium. High quality guinea pig diets contain vitamin C, which your guinea pig requires. Ensure that the pellets are eaten within 90 days of the mill date on the bag as the vitamin C breaks down after this time.

Hay: A high quality timothy or other grass or oat hay should be available to your guinea pig at all times free choice. Alfalfa hay should be avoided as it is too high in calcium. Hay should be green; if it is brown or yellow it is old and should not be used. To prolong the quality of your timothy hay, store it in a cool dark area away from all light.

Vegetables: Guinea pigs enjoy a variety of leafy greens and vegetables (see the “Healthy Shopping Guide for Guinea Pigs” fact sheet). Feed these foods in small portions since they should be removed from the cage in a few hours if not eaten. Some vegetables you may feed your cavy include: carrots, carrot tops, parsley, broccoli leaves, red and green peppers, dandelion greens, collard greens, beet greens, kale, radish tops, red leaf lettuce. Fruits such as apples and grapes should only be considered treats and should comprise no more than 5% of the cavy’s daily food intake. An orange slice can be given daily for additional vitamin C.

* Please remember to wash all vegetables and fruits well before feeding them to you guinea pig.

* Pet stores and pet websites sell many different types of rodent treats (e.g. yogurt drops) and we do not recommend these because the main ingredients are usually sugar which can cause disruption of the GI tract of your cavy and this is not good for a guinea pigs health overall.

Supplements: Guinea pigs require 10-30 mg of vitamin C supplemented daily. Vitamin C is contained in pelleted diets made specifically for guinea pigs but it is important to feed the pellets for only 90 days after the mill date of the food as the vitamin C becomes inactivated after that time. You should also include one or more high vitamin C foods daily in your cavy’s diet. Some foods containing vitamin C are ¼ orange, cabbage, kale, red or green peppers, and spinach. Vitamin C is available in tablets for guinea pigs from several companies. The correct amount of vitamin C tablet can be crushed and sprinkled over the fresh vegetables offered to the cavy. We do not recommend supplemental vitamin C in the drinking water as the vitamins are inactivated almost immediately after placement.

* **Dietary Precautions:** Guinea pigs develop dietary preferences early in life and do not adapt readily to changes in the type, appearance, or presentation of their food or water. It is very important to introduce your guinea pig to variety at a young age to prevent potentially dangerous self-imposed fasting by your guinea pig. Cavies have sensitive intestinal tracts and sudden alterations in their diet (even pellet brand) may result in serious GI upset and loss of appetite.

Health Care: It is a good idea to have you guinea pig checked by your veterinarian on a yearly basis for a physical exam (including a fecal and blood work) to insure a long and healthy life. Guinea pigs are very prone to developing dental disease which is often very difficult to diagnose at home until it has become severe. Therefore, preventative medicine (yearly health checks) will increase the chance of diagnosing it early when it can be treated and/or managed.