

Guinea pig care

Guinea pigs, or cavies, are rodents native to South America. They are docile and gentle, yet lively and relatively easy to care for. They have certain needs that need to be met for them to live a healthy life. Life span of a guinea pig is ~ 5-8 years.

Housing

- The cage/enclosure should be as large as possible. Minimum requirement for 1 guinea pig is 1m x 0.5m x 0.25m. The flooring should be solid (plastic-bottomed). Wire-bottomed flooring is not appropriate. The enclosure should be **well ventilated** (wire-topped). Bedding should be provided with a thick layer of hay, straw or shredded paper, replaced regularly (a complete clean out once weekly and spot-clean daily). Upside-down cardboard boxes or a commercially available plastic "pigloo" should be provided for shelter and security. Some guinea pigs enjoy soft fleece beds.
- If kept outdoors, the enclosure should be secure, predator-proof and weather proof. Guinea pigs do not tolerate environmental changes well and should not be exposed to high temperature or high humidity. The recommend temperature range for guinea pigs is 18-26°C. **Guinea pigs can die quickly from heat stroke** and their enclosure should not be placed in direct sunlight.
- If given free roam of the house, it is important to supervise your guinea pig and prevent exposure to household hazards. If given free roam of the backyard, it is important to supervise your guinea pig and ensure that the yard is escape-proof and predator-proof, and that shaded areas are provided.
- Guinea pigs are social animals and should not be kept alone. Do not mix rabbits and guinea pigs.
- Enrichment can be provided by offering toilet paper/paper towel cardboard tubes, cardboard boxes, wooden toys and more, with food items hidden throughout. This encourages exercise and exploration.

Diet

Appropriate diet is one of the most important aspects of pet guinea pig health. Their teeth grow continuously, and they are hindgut fermenters, which means they require a diet high in fibre. They are coprophagic, which means they ingest some of their faeces. Guinea pigs also require a **dietary source of vitamin C**.

- Guinea pigs establish their food preferences early in life. Therefore, it is important to expose them to a range of appropriate foods from a young age as they do not adapt well to dietary change later in life. Diet change should occur gradually over a few weeks and under close observation.
- **Grass hay should be available at all times.** Examples of grass hay are timothy, oaten, wheaten, meadow. Lucerne/alfalfa is NOT a grass hay; it is a legume, which is too high in protein and calcium, and is not suitable for adult guinea pigs.
- **Fresh leafy green vegetables should be offered** as these are an excellent source of vitamin C. Examples of suitable green leafy vegetables include Bok choy, other Asian greens, spinach, kale, carrot tops, dark coloured lettuce, celery, broccoli, parsley, basil, other herbs. As a general guide, 1-2 handfuls per guinea pig per day of at least 3 different varieties should be provided.
- Small quantity of capsicum, tomatoes, kiwi fruit and citrus can be provided as they are high in vitamin C.
- Many commercial pellets/mixes are not nutritionally balanced and can predispose to health problems. Opt for grass-based pellets, containing a minimum of 16% fibre and fortified with vitamin C (eg. Oxbow Cavy Cuisine). Pellets should be fed in small quantities (1/8 cup per guinea pig per day).
- DO NOT feed food high in carbohydrates, fat or simple sugars, such as cereals, grains, seeds, nuts, bread, biscuits, chocolate, corn, beans, peas.
- Guinea pigs have a tendency to tip over any unstable containers or dishes, and soil them. If providing water from a bowl, heavy-based ceramic bowls are less likely to be tipped over. At least 2 sipper water bottles should be provided.

Handling

- Guinea pigs are quite lively and outgoing pets, if well-socialised and handled often while young.
- Guinea pigs are relatively easy to handle. They should be picked up by placing your hands underneath them and supporting the full length of their bodies.
- Some guinea pigs require brushing/grooming. Nails may need to be trimmed occasionally.

Health care

- Newly acquired guinea pigs should be checked by a vet. Annual check-ups are recommended thereafter.