



Guinea Pig Care Sheet

Guinea Pigs can make great additions to the family. They can have outgoing personalities. With proper care these furry friends can live up to 8 years. Since these guys are social animals, they do well in pairs or groups called herds but do need to be monitored for any bullying activity. Getting your piggy friend seen by a veterinarian for yearly exams is highly encouraged. These little friends can develop several health issues; including dental, Gastrointestinal, reproductive, urinary, skin and ear issues. Spaying and neutering is recommended especially when paired with the opposite gender. It will avoid any unwanted litters and reduce the risks of fighting. It will also help prevent reproductive issues such as ovarian cysts, pyometra (infection in the uterus), and many different cancers they can get. Just like cats and dogs, there is a high population of guinea pigs in shelters all over the country, so adoption is highly encouraged.

As discussed above, pigs may require routine dental work. Most seen are molar issues. They can develop what we call steppes and points on the teeth that can grow into their tongue or cheeks. Signs of dental issues most often present as changes in appetite. Most owners notice that their pig will stop eating hay or pellets but will still eat soft veggies, or they will drop food (will take a bite of something but either will spit it out or will just fall out of their mouth when trying to chew) or will appear to be drooling.

Another common health issue we see is GI Stasis. GI stasis is where there is a lack of mobility in the guinea pig's gastrointestinal tract. Guinea pigs are "hind-gut fermenters" which means that their diet is broken down at the end of their GI tract in an area called the cecum. The cecum is filled with microbes that will break down fibrous foods that these little guys are eating. Most of the time the food needs to be broken down even further to absorb most of the essential vitamins and minerals that were missed during the first part of digestion, so a product called cecotropes is produced. Cecotropes are softer stools that the guinea pig eats to aid in the second half of digestion to absorb those missing vitamins and minerals. They are produced mostly at night so most of the time you may not see them or will wake up to a small portion of missed pieces in the cage. Back to GI stasis, it can be caused by many things but the most common are stress and discomfort. We have seen cases that the owner has a single guinea pig that is bonded to them so owner leaves town and comes back to a guinea pig that is not eating or defecating, or an older guinea pig that is arthritic and is uncomfortable moving around so they slow down on eating as well. GI stasis is a life-threatening condition that needs to be addressed sooner than later. Common signs are anorexia (lack of appetite) for over 4 hours, lack of stools or diarrhea. Being fermenters, when the GI tract is slowed, they will get an excess amount of gas filling their cecum causing a lot of discomfort, so you will see their abdomen become distended and feel like a balloon when touched. Another cause of GI stasis is liver lobe torsion. This is when the liver flips over itself and causes extreme pain and blood back up that may need surgery. Most cases of GI stasis can be diagnosed with the help of radiographs. Radiographs will help show the excess buildup of gas and the severity of it will help decide the route of treatment. If caught early enough, we can supplement feed with critical care and some fluids and pain medication, or it may be severe enough that hospitalization may be required. If there are any concerns of stasis, then it is best to get your guinea pig seen as soon as possible. It becomes very life-threatening if there has not been any food consumption or stool production for over 6 hours.

Diet plays a huge role in keeping a guinea pig happy and healthy for as long as possible. As mentioned above, these guys are hind-end fermenters, so they require a high fiber diet. Hay should consist of 80% of their diet. The type of hay is important as well. As juveniles, guinea pigs should be eating alfalfa hay which is higher in protein and calcium to aid in proper growth. Around 6 months of age, we should be transitioning to a grass hay such as timothy or orchard hay. Most pet stores carry blended hay so in the 6 months to 1 year mark you can feed an alfalfa grass blend. At a year of age and older they should be eating grass hay, as stated above alfalfa is high in calcium. With elevated levels of calcium guinea pigs will excrete it through their urine but we can see issues with it such as sludgy urine. Sometimes the calcium builds up in their bladder and will cause stones to develop and the only way to get rid of them is through surgery. If you notice your guinea pig urinating blood or is not producing as much urine, it is a good idea to get them seen.

Veggies are another crucial part of their diet. Guinea pigs should get about ½-1 cups of vegetables per pig a day. For juveniles younger than 6 months it is recommended to keep vegetables to a small amount. Their guts have not developed the proper bio load (beneficial bacteria) to properly digest larger amounts of vegetables, so it is good to only give sample size servings to help introduce vegetables into their diet. As they get older, over 6 months, you can slowly add more to their daily intake. When introducing new vegetables to any guinea pig's diet, it is good to add them in small doses as well to reduce the risk of diarrhea. Vegetables can make up 10% of their diet. We try keeping calcium rich vegetables to a minimum to help reduce the risk of stones, as well as sugar rich vegetables, which can cause an imbalance in gut bacteria. Calcium rich vegetables include things like kale and collard greens; sugar rich vegetables such as carrots and sweet potatoes. The best vegetables for our little friends should consist of leafy greens, herbs, and nutrient dense vegetables. Guinea pigs do not produce their own vitamin c, so veggies rich in vitamin C are the best options. There are commercially available products that can be bought to supplement vitamin C. We recommend Oxbow vitamin C cookies. We don't recommend the water additives because they are light sensitive and can lose potency, so your pig may not be receiving enough through that. Below is a list of veggies that are safe for guinea pigs:

- Arugula, Basil, Beets tops, Bok choy, Carrot tops, Collard greens (in small portions), Coriander / cilantro, Cucumber leaves, Dandelion greens, Dill leaves, Endive, Escarole, Fennel leafy tops and base, Kale (in small portions), Butterhead lettuce, green leaf lettuce, red leaf lettuce, Romaine lettuce, Peppermint leaves, Spearmint, Mustard greens, parsley, purslane, raspberry leaves, radicchio, radish tops and sprouts, spinach (in small portions), spring greens, sprouts, Swiss chard, thistles (bull, milk, sow), turnip greens, watercress

Things to add/rotate through their diet in small portions due to high sugar content or can cause excess gas:

- Artichoke leaves, Asparagus, Baby sweetcorn, Beets, Banana peppers, Bell peppers / Sweet peppers, Broccoli, Broccolini, Brussels sprouts, Carrots, Cauliflower, Celery, Celeriac/celery root, Cucumber, Green beans, Okra, Green peas, Snow peas, Sugar snap peas, Parsnip, Pumpkin, Radish, Squash, Turnip

Fruits should only be given as sparing treats since they are high in sugar, small pieces of apples, bananas or berries can be used for things like training or bonding.

A grass hay-based pellet is good for added nutrition and should make up about 5% of their diet. A 1/8cup per adult pig a day is recommended. A brand like oxbow is what we recommend.

Housing is a common issue in guinea pig households, mostly because of the way pet stores advertise cages for these guys. Guinea pigs are very active pets and require space to run and hide. Most of the cages sold in pet stores are not large enough for most guinea pigs to stretch out comfortably and get the exercise needed. With the smaller cages sold by most stores, guinea pigs will need longer periods of "outside" time to get as much exercise. We recommend using X-pens or c&c cages (minimum 2x4 ft cage) to house 2 guinea pigs comfortably, the larger the space the better. Keeping the cage lined with fleece blankets is preferred over paper or wood bedding. We recommend adding cushioned spots throughout their living spaces to also give their feet a break from the hard/rough floors or the rough texture of carpet, which both can cause bumblefoot especially in older arthritic pets. Adding a mat with a fleece covering

or commercially made guinea pig pillows will help prevent further issues. You will also have to keep their areas chew proof. Since these guys have continuously growing teeth, they will chew on anything they can. Removing cords or any other things that can be chewed on that can cause harm, watching mats to make sure they are not ingesting pieces, and lastly making sure there also are not things that your guinea pig can get stuck in/under. Guinea pigs arent really litterbox trained but keeping a designated litter area where they keep their hay at will make clean up a lot easier. Depending on how many guinea pigs you may have, the larger the area is better and having multiple hides and feeding stations will help prevent unwanted fighting over resources.

As stated in the beginning, guinea pigs generally do better in pairs or groups. A lot of guinea pigs from the shelter generally have a bonded buddy with them but if you are getting from a breeder or trying to get a friend for your already established guinea pig, it can be a little complicated bonding them. Taking things slow is the best. Having 2 separate cages in one room is a good start so they can see and smell each other. Over time it will move on to having them running around in the same area during supervised play time. Eventually leading them to living in the same space. Unfortunately, there are some cases when bonding guinea pigs is too stressful or aggressive and the bonding just doesn't work out. Every guinea pig is an individual and some just don't like being paired with another guinea pig.

If there are any concerns with your guinea pig and its care feel free to contact the clinic

Thank you,

ACE Staff