

Guinea Pig Care Guide

Wheek! Wheeek! Wheeek! The sounds of a happy guinea pig, welcoming you home or begging for food, are part of the many joys of sharing your home with these wonderful animals. Also known as cavies, guinea pigs have both a gentle and sociable nature, making them the perfect companion for many. Nevertheless, the decision to bring guinea pigs into your home should not be impulsive and full consideration should be given to the responsibilities of adopting. Adoption is a lifelong and long-term commitment, as guinea pigs live 5-7 years or longer. Your guinea pig's health and happiness will be dependent on your ability to provide food, water, medical care, clean housing, and companionship throughout its lifetime.



A Guinea Pig playpen, a commercial cage, and a homemade C&C cage are shown above.

Housing

Guinea pigs require ample room for both physical exercise and mental stimulation. Ideally, the cage should be as large as possible and in accordance with the recommended size of 7 ft² per cavy, with 1-2 ft² extra for each additional cavy. Although many pet stores carry cages marketed especially for guinea pigs, most are too small to house even a single guinea pig. An easy and economical alternative to buying a commercial cage is to build your guinea pigs' home yourself, using storage cubes and corrugated plastic. C & C cages, as they are commonly known, provide excellent ventilation, plenty of room to run around, and can be built in many different styles.

Other considerations when buying/building a cage include ventilation, flooring, bedding, and cleaning. Aquariums and other solid-walled cages should not be used due to the lack of ventilation. Never use wire-bottomed cages, as the guinea pig has sensitive feet that can easily be cut on the wire and become infected. Additionally, guinea pigs may slip through the wire and, in a panic, break their own limbs.

The bottom of the cage should be covered (1-2 in) with an absorbent, odorless bedding, such as CareFresh or Yesterday's News, aspen shavings, or kiln-dried pine. Never use cedar shavings or pine shavings that are not kiln-dried and properly aired out, as the aromatic oils found in these products have been linked to respiratory problems. Also, avoid sawdust, cat litter, and corncob bedding due to the excess dust and the danger of ingestion. Change the bedding every 4-6 days for optimal health.

Accessories in the cage include a clean water bottle (16 oz. or more), a heavy, non-tippable crock for food, and a hideaway, which provides a quiet area for security and sleeping.

Even if living in the largest cage, guinea pigs will enjoy some floor time, where they can explore a new, larger area. For most homes, the kitchen is the ideal playplace, as it can be easily blocked off and cleaned. Lining the floor with old towels or rugs will help keep the floors clean and give the cavies more traction to run. Before

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allowing your guinea pig to roam, however, make sure there are no small areas it can squeeze into and possibly get trapped in. Additionally, keep all wires out of reach of a guinea pig's curious mouth. Some people may prefer to let their guinea pigs explore the outside world, but more precautions must be taken. There are many dangers outside predators can be close by such as dogs, cats, and hawks. Never leave your guinea pig alone outside and always have them in a covered safe enclosure. Guinea pigs can not take the heat so never take your guinea pig outside on hot days and always make sure even on cooler days that your guinea pig has shade. To avoid illness, do not allow guinea pigs to roam and graze on fertilized lawns, gardens with poisus plants or mold, or where other animals may have left droppings.

Diet

Grass hay, Bunny Bunch Blend such as Timothy, Orchard Grass, and Bluegrass, should be the staple of every guinea pig's diet. An unlimited amount of fresh hay will maintain a healthy digestive system and prevent overgrown teeth. Grass hay may be supplemented with alfalfa hay for young cavies (under 1 year), pregnant or nursing sows, or underweight adults. Alfalfa hay should not be given to healthy adult guinea pigs due to its high calcium content, which may contribute to bladder stones as the guinea pig ages.

A limited amount of guinea pig pellets should be provided daily. In general, an adult guinea pig will eat about 1/8 cup of pellets daily, if provided ample hay. Of course, most guinea pigs will eat more pellets than they should, which could lead to obesity and obesity related health problems. Although they may all look similar, a wide range of quality exists in pellets. The first ingredient listed should be timothy hay, not alfalfa hay or corn. Also, no animal by-products should be used and mixes with dyes and nuts should be avoided. Most pet store chains do not carry high quality pellets, such as Oxbow Hay Co.'s Cavy Cuisine, but they are available through Bunny Bunch's Boutique and at many local feed stores.

Due to their inability to manufacture vitamin C, responsible caregivers must be aware of the amount of vitamin C in cavies' diets. To prevent scurvy, guinea pigs should consume 10 to 30 mg/kg daily. Pellets formulated with a stable form of vitamin C, supplemented with fresh green veggies, ensure the guinea pig's needs are met. Sick, young, and pregnant/nursing guinea pigs benefit from additional vitamin C. To increase vitamin C intake, a quarter of a 100 mg vitamin C tablet or a few drops of liquid vitamin C can be given directly.

In addition to pellets and hay, the guinea pig diet requires about 1 to 2 cups of fresh vegetables daily. These vegetables, such as parsley, cilantro, romaine, red leaf, escarole or endive lettuce, provide vitamin C and other nutrients. Other vegetables that guinea pigs appreciate include bell peppers, small amounts of carrots, dandelion greens, tomatoes, corn husks and silk. Fresh fruits can be given as a treat, due to their high sugar content it is important not to give too much or their GI tract can be affected causing illness. Some favorite fruits include apples (do not give apple seeds or core), cantaloupe and other melons. Bananas should be given sparingly and in very small portions, as their high potassium content may cause cardiovascular problems. Avoid giving your guinea pigs iceberg lettuce, as it has little nutritional value and contains an excessive amount of water.

Although it may be tempting to buy colorful mixes or treats marketed for guinea pigs at pet stores, remember that most of these products do not have the guinea pig's health in mind. Do not give any dairy or meat products, dried fruit, nuts, or seeds. Also, do not use mineral wheels or give multivitamins. Although a plain vitamin C supplement is acceptable, multivitamins are unnecessary and potentially dangerous. Also, never use Tang or other sugary substances to meet the guinea pig's vitamin C needs.

Behavior

The guinea pig's unique behavioral traits are part of the many joys of opening up your home to guinea pigs. Unlike dogs and cats, the guinea pigs' role as prey animal governs their actions. Consequently, they choose flight over fight in any frightening situation, which both contributes to their gentle nature and causes some people to consider them nervous and indifferent to their human companions. This opinion is far from accurate, however. All it takes to earn your guinea pigs' trust is patience, parsley, and other treats, and before you know it, they will be seeking you out (and wheeking, of course!) whenever they hear you approach.

Although most guinea pigs do not particularly enjoy the actual act of picking them up, they do enjoy a quiet cuddle time on your lap. A guinea pig that doesn't feel safe and secure, however, will not enjoy being out in the open. You should always use two hands to pick up cavies; one hand supports their bottom and the other supports their chest. Also, avoid chasing your guinea pigs repeatedly around the cage to pick them up. Although it may sometimes seem impossible to avoid a chase, it is best to guide your guinea pig into a corner by gently creating a barricade with your hands, and then scooping him up with two hands. Most guinea pigs enjoy being safely cradled close to your body while you are moving about. Children should sit in a chair or couch when holding a guinea pig and be monitored to prevent any accidental harm from occurring. Also, it may be wise to have a thick towel between your lap and the guinea pig, just in case the guinea pig has to relieve itself.

Although guinea pigs do not have tails to wag, they express their joy and happiness in other ways, some subtle and some very obvious. For most young guinea pigs, their excitement causes them to jump wildly in the air and bounce around. Popcorning, as this frenzied joy is called, can sometimes worry new guinea pig parents, but it is totally normal and evidence of a happy, well-cared for pig. As pigs get older, they may popcorn more infrequently, but they still communicate with loud wheeks.

Due to their highly social nature, guinea pigs need to have at least one other cage mate to be truly content. Guinea pigs who live alone are less active, less curious, less vocal, and a lot lonelier. Of course, the cage mate should be of the same sex or neutered, as an abundance of unwanted guinea pigs already fills the local shelters. It is a myth that two unaltered boys cannot live together. As long as the boys have a roomy C & C cage (a 2 x 4 grid size or a 2x3 with loft), two hidey houses and food bowls, and were properly introduced, there should be no problem. In general, it is easiest to introduce a baby male to an older male or two baby males, although two adult males may be compatible, depending on their personalities.

The rules of introduction apply to both males and females, as both sexes must first determine a hierarchical order before living in harmony. It is essential that guinea pigs first encounter one another on neutral territory and you should dedicate a large block of time to observing the guinea pigs. Never put the new guinea pig directly into the other's cage! If possible block off a large area of a kitchen or bathroom and place a large pile of hay or veggies in the center and place the piggies together. Closely observe their interactions and have thick towels ready, in case it becomes necessary to interrupt any serious fighting. Most guinea pigs will first ignore one another and then determine which pig is the dominant one by chasing, mounting, chattering their teeth, rumblestrutting (a low purr with a swaggering walk), or challenging each other in various ways. In general, this phase will last about one hour and once they have sorted out their order, they should still be watched for another 1-2 hours in the neutral territory. Once they appear very comfortable in each other's presence, it is time to place them in their cage together. Make sure the cage has been completely cleaned with a vinegar solution, along with all the accessories, to remove all previous scents. Once again, watch them closely until the guinea pigs are at ease.

References

Guinealynx www.guinealynx.com

- Excellent reference for medical-related questions and general care. Also, has a very informative forum to discuss any questions or concerns or share the antics of guinea pigs