

## Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs are hardy and affectionate, and make great companions. However, people often think of them as “low-maintenance” pets, when in reality, they require a lot of care and attention. In return, they will reward you with years of companionship.

### HOME SWEET HOME

More space is better when it comes to your guinea pig’s cage! For one or two guinea pigs, the cage should be no smaller than 7.5 square feet (30” x 36”); for two cavies, the ideal size is 10.5 square feet (30” x 50”). If you plan to have more than two guinea pigs, add on 1-2 square feet of space for each additional guinea pig. Cages with mesh or wire flooring can be harmful to your guinea pig’s feet. In addition, you’ll want to provide your pig with a wooden “house,” tunnels to crawl through and platforms to climb on.

When choosing floor linings and cage furnishings, keep in mind that guinea pigs will chew on just about anything, so everything placed in the cage must be nontoxic. Use plenty of lining material, such as shredded newspaper, or commercial nesting materials available at pet-supply stores. DO NOT use materials such as sawdust, cedar chips or corn cob as they may cause respiratory, digestive or other serious health problems. For safe bedding options, visit <http://www.Guineapigcages.com/bedding.htm>.

To provide a clean environment for your guinea pig, be sure to clean its cage at least three to four times a week.

### CHOW TIME

Cavies cannot manufacture their own vitamin C, so using a commercial guinea pig food enriched with vitamin C will provide them with what they need. Do not add vitamin C drops to your pet’s water as this can make the water taste bitter and discourage your cavy from drinking.

Provide plenty of high-quality hay, like timothy or orchard grass, to help keep their digestive tracts running smoothly. Also, you can supplement your guinea pig’s diet with fresh foods like carrots, dark green lettuce, cucumbers, dark green vegetables, sprouts, corn and a variety of fruit. These items will serve as an additional source of vitamin C and other nutrients. Always introduce new foods slowly and in small amounts to reduce the risk of diarrhea. Use a heavy crockery bowl that can’t be tipped over and is easy to clean. Also keep fresh water available in a suspended “licker” water bottle at all times. For more information on foods that are safe for guinea pigs, we recommend that you talk to your veterinarian.

Many sources will tell you to provide a salt lick for your guinea pig, but unfortunately, there isn’t a consensus on the use of this product. Some say it can help prevent mineral deficiencies, while others state that too much salt can lead to health issues. However, if you are feeding your cavy a well-balanced diet, this product shouldn’t be necessary. Check with your veterinarian before buying any type of salt or mineral lick.

### HEALTH MATTERS

A well-cared-for guinea pig may live four to eight years. Male guinea pigs can weigh between 1 to 2 ½ pounds, females slightly less. Guinea pigs are sexually mature between 4 and 8 weeks of age.

Guinea pigs groom themselves with their front teeth, tongue and back claws, but they still require frequent brushing and the occasional bath to stay clean and tangle free, particularly the long-haired breeds. Use a soft baby brush or toothbrush for brushing. Because your guinea pig's teeth grow continuously, it's essential that

you provide plenty of timothy grass hay at all times in addition to its regular food to provide a chewing medium. Your guinea pig's nails can also overgrow, causing discomfort and increasing your risk of being scratched. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to trim its nails.

### **HANDLING WITH CARE**

Guinea pigs are easily stressed and require careful handling. Always let your guinea pig know you're there by allowing it to sniff your hand. They are also easily startled, so use a quiet, calm voice and slow movements. To pick up your guinea pig, always use two hands, placing one hand under its chest just behind the front legs, and gently cup your other hand under its hindquarters. Once you have a firm but gentle grip, lift it up and immediately pull it close to your chest or lap so it doesn't thrash around. Guinea pigs feel most secure when they're held close to your body and when their feet are supported. Since guinea pigs aren't very agile, a fall could result in serious injury.

Guinea pigs love to have their heads scratched and will frequently make a "chattering" sound similar to a cat's purr to show their appreciation. Also, when happy they will at times buck and throw themselves in the air, a behavior known as "popcorning." The more you handle your guinea pig, the friendlier and tamer it will become. Guinea pigs can be quite vocal and will often greet you with whistles and shrieks.

### **BEHAVIOR BITS**

Guinea pigs are social creatures and enjoy the company of other animals, especially other guinea pigs. It is easiest to pair two babies or one baby and one adult, but pairing two adults can also be done successfully. A good way to go about introducing your guinea pigs is to start on neutral territory and monitor their behavior for at least an hour. If they do well with each other, try placing them in a large freshly cleaned cage (that will be their new home), and monitor them in the cage for at least an hour. If your guinea pigs are not getting along, stay calm and separate them with a towel to avoid being bit. When pairing a male and female, be sure to have the male neutered or you'll soon have unwanted litters!

Guinea pigs have a keen sense of sight. They also have the ability to recognize all the colors of the spectrum. Their hearing is even better than their vision, and they can quickly learn to respond to a specific sound. Young guinea pigs love to jump, so you might want to build them an obstacle course for exercise.

### **RESOURCES**

<http://www.cavyspirit.com/>

Bielfeld, Horst. *Guinea Pigs: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual*. Barron Book Series. New York.

Willkie, Tom. *A Beginner's Guide to Guinea Pigs*. T.F.H. Publications.