

Caring for Your Guinea Pig



About Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs (or cavies) are very popular pets. They are naturally clean, hardy, and are excellent first pets for children. Although they may be nervous at first, they become used to being handled, as long as it is done gently.

There are several varieties of guinea pigs and whether you have chosen a Silky, Teddy Bear, Short-haired, Peruvian or Abyssinian, your new pet will become a valuable and entertaining member of your family.

When you bring your guinea pig home, set up its new home before you take it out of the carrying box. After placing it into its new home, allow a few quiet days before handling your new pet.

Begin by offering a treat such as a fresh carrot stick. Your guinea pig will smell it and then begin to nibble or grasp it. Always talk to your pet in a gentle voice and soon you will be petting its head, back, and ears.

Habitat

When selecting a home for your guinea pig, choose a spacious wire enclosure with a deep plastic base for easy cleaning. Because guinea

pigs cannot tolerate high levels of humidity, avoid getting a glass aquarium. A wire enclosure provides the ventilation required by your guinea pig. Guinea pigs acclimate to average household temperatures; avoid areas where the temperature exceeds 80°F. Be sure to position the habitat out of direct sunlight. A solid floor is optimal.

Guinea pig habitats should be located in an area that encourages interaction with the family, but also allows needed rest periods during the day. Most guinea pigs become acclimated to their pet parents' activity cycle but are still more active in the evening.

What Else Do I Need?

Accessories. Providing places to hide within their enclosure gives guinea pigs a sense of security and alleviates stress. There are several types of guinea pig accessories that will accomplish this goal. You may also use an upside-down cardboard box, but these may absorb moisture or be more difficult to clean than a purchased accessory. Cavies love to play and forage. Make sure to include items to keep them entertained.

Chew Toys. A guinea pig's teeth never stop growing. Provide chew toys specifically made for cavies to help grind their teeth and keep them healthy.

Feeders. A bin feeder attached to the side of the enclosure provides a contamination-free method of feeding. A hanging hay manger eliminates soiled and wasted hay. There are

many types of hanging or swinging food holders that provide a hygienic way to dispense food. These food holders can provide hours of entertainment and activity for your pet.

Bedding. If using a solid floor, a generous amount of absorbent, dust-free bedding should be used to line the floor, along with a pile of timothy-grass or hay. Replace the bedding frequently to maintain a clean and odor-free environment. Avoid substrates with oils or wood dust that may irritate your pet.

Handling

The best way to pick up your new guinea pig is to approach on its level and begin talking to it. Let it come to you, presenting the back of your hand for it to smell. Gently place your hand across its shoulders with your thumb behind one side of its front legs. Gently lift the guinea pig and place your other hand under its body to support its weight. Hold it on your lap, or close to your chest if you are then standing up.

Grooming

The first step in grooming your guinea pig is establishing a relationship. Your pet needs to trust you, and allow you to touch and hold it. Start by offering your pet treats from your

More ...

This information is designed as a basic guide. There are several books and online resources available which provide in-depth information on guinea pigs and their care.

hand while talking softly, and then pet it until it's comfortable letting you hold it. You don't need to worry: guinea pigs rarely, if ever, bite.

Once you have established this relationship, purchase a specially designed small animal brush. Use the brush daily, even if you are just using the brush to pet your guinea pig, to establish the grooming routine. You will also need to purchase a nail trimmer designed for small animals, and an antiseptic blood stopper in the event the nail is trimmed too close.

Water and Food

Your guinea pig should have a constant supply of water. For hygienic reasons, provide fresh water daily using a ball-tip water bottle.

Purchase food and treats specifically made for guinea pigs. These diets will meet your pet's requirements for fiber, minerals and vitamins, including vitamin C. Fresh vegetables and fruit may be added as an additional source of vitamin C: mustard greens, kale, broccoli, brussels sprouts, tomatoes, red or green peppers, spinach, asparagus and oranges and lemons (including the peels). Dry Vitamin C supplements such as wafers are another option. Cavies are adapted to low moisture diets, and excess vegetables in the diet may cause diarrhea.

Your guinea pig should be fed an unlimited supply of low calcium/protein grass hays such as orchard or timothy-grass. Cavies are natural foragers, so hide a little food around the cage for your pet to find.

Keeping Your Guinea Pig Healthy

Guinea pigs are sensitive to changes in temperature and humidity, so locating their habitat away from drafts and bright windows is important. Because they are nervous animals by nature, guinea pigs may refuse food and water if their cage is moved or their diet is changed. Guinea pigs are naturally social animals and the presence of other cavies helps to reduce stress from these changes.

Check your pet regularly for changes in appearance and behavior, particularly weight loss. Fatigue, hunched posture, unusual movement, breathing difficulty and discharge from the eyes or nose are clinical signs of illness and require a veterinary exam. Foot sores or broken nails are signs of pododermatitis. Consult your veterinarian for the proper treatment.

Diarrhea, hair loss and joint pain are indicative of Vitamin C deficiency. Be sure the vegetables and fruits in your guinea pig's diet are fresh. Your veterinarian should confirm the cause of these symptoms and prescribe treatment.

Hair loss or change in appearance, particularly on the tip of the nose, eyes and forehead, may be signs of ringworm; check with your vet for treatment.

Guinea pigs are very sensitive to certain antibiotics. You should consult your veterinarian before administering any medications.

Avoiding Human Illness

Guinea pigs may carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans, including ringworm, salmonellosis, rat bite fever, and lymphocytic choriomeningitis. The simple precautions below can help prevent the risk of infection.

- ✓ Closely supervise children and make sure they wash their hands with soap and water after handling small animals, their habitats or anything in their habitats.
- ✓ As cute and cuddly as they are, do not kiss small animals. Illnesses are sometimes spread this way.
- ✓ Never use food-preparation areas to clean small animal habitats or anything in their habitats. If you clean the habitat in the bathroom, disinfect the area completely afterwards.
- ✓ Clean the habitat, food and water bowls in a well-ventilated area.

Children under 5, pregnant women, senior citizens, and people with weakened immune systems run a greater risk of infection; contact your health care provider for more information.

