

How to care for your guinea pig



How to care for your guinea pig

Hopefully this information will answer some of the questions you may have about your new guinea pig.

Housing

A single guinea pig will need a hutch about 90 cm long by a minimum of 40 cm wide and 40 cm high. For two or more guinea pigs, the hutch should be at least 120 cm long by 60 cm deep and 40 cm high. The hutch should have an enclosed sleeping area with a solid wooden door as well as a larger, wire-fronted day area.

The hutch can be kept outside, but should be covered to protect from cold and draughts in the winter so that the guinea pig does not get pneumonia. It is best to move the hutch to a shed or garage (not if you keep the car in there though, as they are very susceptible to the fumes!) if it gets very cold or wet. Some people like to keep their guinea pig in a plastic cage in the house.

Guinea pigs will also enjoy going into a run on the lawn in the summer months. It is best to only put them on the grass between May and September, and then only when the grass is dry, as they are susceptible to catching chills and pneumonia. Make sure that water and a hiding place (such as an upturned box) to avoid heatstroke are available. The run should be at least the size of the hutch, and will need moving regularly as they eat grass very quickly!

Guinea pigs like company, and same sex pairs or trios work well as long as they are introduced at a young age. They will get very lonely if kept on their own. Do not be tempted to buy a rabbit as company for your guinea pig, as the rabbit will usually grow to be much bigger than the guinea pig and could seriously hurt it with their back legs or teeth! Also, guinea pigs cannot be fed rabbit food as it does not contain Vitamin C, and although guinea pig food can be fed to rabbits, it will not be as good for them.

Bedding and cleaning out the hutch

Sawdust should be used on the floor of the hutch, with hay provided for bedding in the sleeping compartment. Plenty of fresh hay should always be available as this is an important part of the diet as well as keeping them warm. We do not use straw as it is of little nutritional value and because it is very coarse it can injure the eyes, etc. Regular cleaning of the dirty areas of the hutch and replacement of soiled bedding will be necessary once or twice a week. Hutch cleaning sprays are available to kill germs and keep the hutch smelling fresh.

Guinea pigs like places to hide such as large cardboard tubes, flower pots, Being rodents, they also like to chew so you can give them willow rings and balls or twigs from fruit trees.

Handling

It is very important to handle your guinea pig as much as possible in order for it to remain tame. Your guinea pig has been handled regularly since birth. Guinea pigs should be lifted and carried carefully, making sure the whole body is supported. If a guinea pig does not feel secure, it will struggle. They often do not appreciate being restrained and may push your hand out of the way quite firmly if they are not in the mood for being stroked! A daily inspection of your guinea pig is vital, as many diseases are treatable only in the early stages and handling will enable you to detect early symptoms such as abscesses, breathing problems, skin problems, etc.

On bringing your guinea pig to his/her new home it is best to leave him/her to settle into the new surroundings without further disturbance until the following morning, making sure there is plenty of food and water available. This will help them to adjust to their new environment and help prevent the move from being too stressful

Feeding

Dry food

It is essential that guinea pigs receive Vitamin C in their diet every day, as, like us, they are unable to produce their own. If they do not receive such a diet, they will lose weight, develop skin problems and eventually scurvy. Your guinea pig is presently being fed on Supreme Petfoods "Gerty Guinea Pig" food, which contains 250mg per kg of Vitamin C. This is available loose or in pre-packed bags from most pet shops. While they are growing they should receive a large handful of dry food twice a day, this will be until they are around six months old (fully grown). From then on the amount of food should be reduced to just what they will clear in 30-45 minutes. Feeding ad-lib will lead to a very fat / unhealthy pig! Make sure they eat all the different ingredients so that they are getting a balanced diet - they can get quite fussy! Provide dry food in heavy bowls which they cannot easily tip over.

If you do decide to give a different dry food from the one we use, this must be done very gradually over a 10 day period, mixing 10% of the new food to 90% of the food we have provided on day one, increasing the amount of new food by 10% each day until the diet has been changed over.

Hay

This is an important part of your guinea pig's diet. Make sure hay is available all the time (ideally in a hay rack to keep it fresh and clean). It is also possible to feed Burgess Supa Forage or Spillers Readigrass which is chopped dry grass - useful in the winter when no fresh grass is available.

Green food

Fresh green food is an important source of Vitamin C, and should be fed daily in addition to the dry food. Your guinea pig has been gradually introduced to fresh-cut grass, spring greens, apple, broccoli, celery, kale and carrots, receiving small quantities of some of these each day. Feed hand-cut grass rather than that from lawn cutting (from a lawn mower) as it may contain oil. Make sure that if you collect grass from fields, etc. that it has not been contaminated by dogs or other animals and that there are no poisonous plants in the grass, as guinea pigs cannot tell what is poisonous and what is OK. It is possible to introduce a wider range of green food, e.g. dandelions, cucumber, etc. but as he/she will never have had these before, only give a very small portion to begin with. It is a good idea to wash green food before feeding it.

Poisonous plants

Foodstuffs to avoid include ivy, buttercups, honeysuckle, potatoes and potato leaves, tomato leaves, rhubarb, too much spinach and lettuce, lawn mowings (hand cut grass is fine), toxic plants, e.g. foxgloves, plants which grow from bulbs, e.g. bluebells, daffodils, tulips, crocuses, sugary treats and mouldy food.

Water

Your guinea pig is used to drinking from a water bottle rather than a bowl. The water should be changed regularly and in winter you will need to check that it doesn't freeze if the hutch is kept outside. If your guinea pig suddenly stops drinking or starts to drink excessively, it can indicate a health problem. The same is true for food intake as well.

If you are going away for a day or two, it is possible to leave the guinea pig behind as long as the hutch is well stocked with dry food, hay and green food as well as extra water. In winter you may need to get someone to come and check that the bottles are not frozen.

Health

Routine care

When handling your guinea pig, things to keep a check on are:

Ears - any waxy deposit, head shaking, etc. could indicate ear mites

Eyes - discharge or inflammation

Mouth - dribbling, scabs or sores, overgrown teeth

Nose - discharge, sneezing

Fur - scratching, signs of parasites such as fur mites

Bottom area - should be clean and dry, check for trapped hay, sawdust, etc.

Grease gland - will need cleaning occasionally, particularly if you have a male guinea pig (boar)

Claws - these will need to be trimmed as they grow continuously. I will have cut them just before you pick your guinea pig up, but they will need trimming every few months. It is possible to do this yourself with a pair of nail clippers. Cut the top of the claw off, taking great care not to cut the quick as it will be very painful and bleed a lot. It is easy to see the pink coloured quick in animals with white claws, more difficult with dark claws. We can show you how to do this rather than you having to pay for it to be done at the vet!

Common Diseases

Skin problems

Guinea pigs are prone to these, and will probably pick up mites even if kept very clean. Mites can be controlled by bathing in a medicated shampoo (from vet or pet shop) and repeating after two weeks to kill the eggs. Make sure they are completely dry before taking them outside to the hutch. Severe skin problems (symptoms include scratching and hair loss) will require an injection at the vets.

Grease gland

All guinea pigs have a grease gland just above where the tail would be. This will need cleaning occasionally, especially in males. Use Swarfega to soften up the hardened grease, washing off after ten minutes. Again, make sure the guinea pig is completely dry before taking outside.

Colds/pneumonia

Listen out for sneezing and snuffling in your guinea pig, as a cold can develop into pneumonia which can be fatal. Guinea pigs can catch colds from humans, so get someone else to look after them if you have a cold. Take your guinea pig to the vet if you suspect respiratory problems.

Tooth Problems

The signs to watch for include dribbling, weight loss, and difficulty eating hard foods.

There are many different causes, the most common being poor breeding and nutrition. The back or front teeth can become affected, developing sharp spurs that grow into the side of the tongue or cheeks. This cannot be easily seen but the other symptoms may be recognised instead. It is relatively straightforward to keep trimming the front teeth if they alone are affected, but if the back teeth are involved this may require repeated general anaesthetics. In the most severely affected individuals the back tooth roots can start to grow up into the eye sockets or down through the bottom jaw giving rise to eye problems. You should provide a diet high in fibre as detailed above, to try to prevent this distressing problem.

Ear problems

If your guinea pig scratches its ears and/or shakes its head, it has ear mites. Otodex ear drops (from pet shops) will kill them. If they are very severe and do not clear up in a couple of days, you will need to take your guinea pig to the vet for an injection.

It is recommended that you buy a book about guinea pig care (see below) as there are other ailments your guinea pig could catch too.

Recommended books

Guineapiglopaedia by Margaret Elward and Mette Ruelokke
The Really Useful Guinea Pig Guide by Myra Mahoney
The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs by Peter Gurney

Useful Addresses

Cavies Magazine
Tony O'Neill
29 Brecon Way
Downley
High Wycombe
Bucks
HP13 5NN
caviesmagazine@ntlworld.com

Fur and Feather Magazine
(Printing for Pleasure Ltd)
Elder House
Chattisham
Ipswich
Suffolk
IP8 3QE
Tel: 01473 652 789

National Cavy Club
Secretary: Pauline Avery
79 Thornhill Gardens
Hartlepool
TS26 0JF
www.geocities.com/nationalcavyclub/index.html

If you have any further questions, we would be happy to help!

Fiona Wase and Jon Matthews
Tel: (01597) 825359
fionawase@hotmail.com
www.englishrabbit.org.uk

(If you email me pictures of your guinea pig in his/her new home, I can put them on my website!)
