



CARING FOR YOUR GUINEA PIGS

ABOUT GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs (or cavies) are 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, if 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.

Guinea pigs are highly social animals that do best in same-gender pairs or groups. They are extremely communicative with a variety of vocalizations and body language that is easy to read. Understanding what your guinea pig is trying to say when they squeal, rumble or popcorn will further your bond!

HABITAT

Guinea pigs need a lot of room to roam, with a recommended minimum of 7.5 sq ft of living space. When selecting a home for your guinea pig, choose the largest habitat possible. A small animal playpen can also help expand your guinea pig's living quarters. Guinea pigs need a solid floor for foot health, so a spacious wire enclosure with a deep plastic base for easy cleaning is a great choice. Because guinea pigs cannot tolerate high levels of humidity, avoid glass aquariums. 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. Position the habitat out of direct sunlight. A solid floor is optimal.

Guinea pig habitats should be in an area that encourages interaction with the family, but also allows needed rest periods during the day. Most guinea pigs adapt to their owners' activity cycle but are still more active at night.

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 hideaways, some made of wood or plastic and even edible ones! Cavies love to play and forage so make sure to provide a variety of toys to keep them entertained.

Chew Toys. A guinea pig's teeth never stop growing. Chew toys 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 and 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 softly talking to it. Let it come to you, presenting the back of your hand for it to smell. Offer your piggy treats from your hand and then pet it until it's comfortable letting you hold it. 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 using both hands to keep it secure and prevent falls.

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 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 at first, even if you are just using the brush to pet your guinea pig, to establish a grooming routine. Short hair guinea pigs can be brushed weekly, however long hair guinea pigs should be brushed daily to remove tangles and prevent mats. Hairless guinea pigs should have a small amount of non-toxic aloe-based lotion rubbed into its skin at least once a week.

You will also need a nail trimmer designed for small animals for monthly nail trims, 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.

Your guinea pig's diet should be mainly comprised of grass hay, so they 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. Young, pregnant, or nursing guinea pigs can also have alfalfa hay, but it is too rich in protein and calcium for adult guinea pigs and can cause obesity and other health issues.

Purchase food and treats specifically made for guinea pigs that are enriched with vitamin C. These diets will help meet your pet's requirements for fiber and vitamins and minerals. Fresh vegetables and fruit may be added as an additional source of vitamin C: Some examples include mustard greens, kale, broccoli, Brussel 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 to help prevent scurvy which is caused by a vitamin C deficiency. Cavies are adapted to low moisture diets, and excess vegetables in the diet may cause diarrhea. Treats should not exceed 10% of your furry friend's daily diet.

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 and all food and treats offered are high-quality and enriched with vitamin C. 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 sensitive to certain antibiotics. Consult your veterinarian before administering any medications.

Arrange a visit to the veterinarian on your way home from picking up your new guinea pig. The veterinarian will check and make sure it is healthy and can answer any other questions you might have.

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 younger than 5 years old, people with weakened immune systems, and people 65 years of age and older are more likely to get diseases spread between animals and people (also known as zoonotic diseases); contact your health care provider for more information.

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. Contact your veterinarian for additional information.