

Introduction to Guinea Pig Care

Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital

Guinea pigs are wonderful pets. They are relatively easy to care for and will return lots of love and affection.

Caging

Guinea pigs need a large enclosure that provides plenty of room for exercise. The larger the cage, the happier the pig! Choose an enclosure that is well ventilated with a solid floor that is easy to clean. Although glass aquariums and cages with solid plastic walls are easy to clean, they are not well ventilated and can make your pig susceptible to respiratory disease. Pigs kept on wire mesh flooring can develop sores on their feet.

Shredded paper or recycled paper bedding are good choices for bedding. Wood shavings can harbor mites and can cause itchy skin. Carefresh (recycled paper bedding) and Eco-Bedding brand (looks like crinkled brown paper) are excellent choices. Your pig's bedding must be kept clean. Replace it as often as you can to avoid ammonia build up from urine. Usually every 3-4 days works well.

Guinea pigs need a place to hide within their cage. Provide a "house" or box made of plastic (pet stores sell them) that your pig can retreat to when she wants to sleep or hide. A pig without a place to hide is continually stressed and more prone to become sick.

Clean your pet's entire cage at least once weekly. If you can smell the cage (especially the urine), it is not clean enough. You can use a mild antibacterial soap to wash the cage. Rinse thoroughly with hot water. To disinfect your pigs' cage, rinse it first with dilute bleach (1/8 cup to 1 gallon of water) and then rinse again with hot water.

Provide various toys to entertain your pig when she is alone. Cardboard oatmeal canisters, paper towel rolls and wooden chew toys are some possibilities. Guinea pigs love to chew. Keep changing the toys you offer to prevent your pig from becoming bored.

Diet

Guinea pigs eat a completely vegetarian diet. They should be fed dry, clean orchard grass or timothy hay in unlimited quantities. They should also receive a large handful of fresh leafy greens and veggies every day. It is important to offer a mixture of at least three types of greens and vegetables. Dandelion greens, parsley, cilantro, kale and carrot tops are great choices. Beet greens, escarole, radicchio and green/red/yellow bell peppers are other options. We do not recommend feeding dried fruits, nuts/ seeds, fresh fruits, flowers, yoghurt drops or other sweet or carbohydrate-rich items to you guinea pig. Additionally, carrots should be fed very sparingly as a treat only. Finally, we do not recommend feeding any spinach, broccoli or cabbage-like vegetables as these can cause health-related problems.

A small amount of timothy hay based guinea pig pellets can also be offered daily. NEVER give unlimited amounts of pelleted food! This will cause your pig to become overweight and will predispose him to dental problems. Oxbow and Mazuri make very good pelleted food for guinea pigs. Oxbow products can be purchased at some pet stores, online at www.oxbow.com, or at our hospital. Mazuri products are available online at www.mazuri.com.

Avoid alfalfa hay or pellets. They are too high in calcium and calories and too low in fiber. The large amount of calcium in alfalfa can predispose your pig to the formation of bladder or urethral stones.

Young guinea pigs quickly develop dietary preferences. It is important to offer juveniles a variety of foods to help prevent them from refusing new foods later in life. If you need to change your adult pigs' pelleted food, keep in mind that he or she may go on a hunger strike rather than accept the new food. Watch closely to be sure this doesn't happen. A guinea pig that is not eating can quickly become seriously ill.

Fresh water should be available at all times. Use heavy ceramic bowls or water bottles to avoid spilling. Change your pet's water daily to keep it fresh. Be sure to clean your pet's water bottle or bowl on a regular basis. We recommend daily.

Vitamin C

Guinea pigs require vitamin C daily. Unlike most other animals, guinea pigs, humans and some species of bats cannot make the vitamin themselves and must get it in the food they eat. Guinea pigs that do not have enough vitamin C in their diet can develop scurvy. Signs of the disease include bleeding gum, weak joints, weak bones, loose teeth and heart disease. In the worst cases, bones become weak and tend to break even under normal wear.

A juvenile pig needs about 15 milligrams (mg) of vitamin C daily and an adult needs approximately 30 mg each day. We recommend supplementing your pig's diet with vitamin C even if the guinea pig pellets you use are fortified with this vitamin. Approximately half of any

vitamin C added to guinea pig food is lost within days of manufacturing. The best Vitamin C is from Vitamin C rich foods like green and red pepper. If your pig receives ¼ to ½ of a pepper a day, this is all it needs for all the Vitamin C daily.

If your pig will not eat green or red pepper, we recommend giving your pig her vitamin C directly by mouth. Vitamin C added to water degrades very quickly making it an unreliable source. Oxbow makes excellent fruit flavored vitamin C tablets for guinea pigs. We do have it available at our hospital. You may also offer the vitamin C supplements made for children and sold at pharmacies. Offer ½ tablet daily. If you do this, please make sure the Vitamin C supplement you are offering does not contain xylitol, this is toxic to pigs.

Spaying and neutering

Spaying can prevent some medical conditions in guinea pigs, but is not as critical as it is for pet rabbits. Neutering a male will sometimes help reduce aggression. If you are housing male and female pigs together, we recommend neutering the male pigs.

Breeding

Guinea pigs must be bred for the first time BEFORE they are six months of age or before they reach one pound of weight. The pelvis of the female guinea pig fuses at approximately 6 months of age. If a pig is bred after her pelvis fuses, she will most likely not be able to deliver her babies on her own and will need a cesarean section.

Females will go into heat within thirty minutes of giving birth! Be sure to separate the male from the female before she gives birth. Young guinea pigs should be separated by sex before 8 weeks of age to prevent breeding. Females are sexually mature by 2 months of age and males by 3 months!

Heat Stroke

Guinea pigs have thick fur making them susceptible to heat stroke. It is important to keep in mind that summer weather that is comfortable for you might be too hot for your pig. When the temperature climbs into the upper 70's and higher, it is time to start thinking about cooling off your guinea pig. One way to do this is to place blocks of ice in the cage (soda bottles filled with water and then frozen work well.) Bowls of ice cubes are also fine. A fan or air conditioner in the pig's room is a great way to bring down the environmental temperature. Be sure that the fan or air conditioner is not blowing directly on the cage, however. Another alternative is to move your guinea pig to a cool basement during very hot days.

If you notice any of the following signs of heat stroke, wrap your guinea pig in a cool (NOT COLD) wet towel and call us immediately:

- " Rapid breathing
- " Bright red ears
- " Lethargy or lying on her side
- " Thick, stringy saliva
- " Diarrhea

Heat stroke is a very serious condition and can quickly lead to death. Seek help right away!

Heart Disease

Many guinea pigs have underlying heart disease. Sometimes owners will mistake signs of an upper respiratory infection that actually are signs of heart disease. Heavy breathing, a wet nose and cough are signs. Heart disease can be managed in pigs but treatments must be instituted so that the pig does not go into heart failure. Please call if your pig is having any of these clinical signs.

Signs of Disease

Runny eyes, sneezing, diarrhea, lack of appetite, lameness, decreased activity, blood in the urine, and pain are a few of the common signs of disease. Call us as soon as you notice any of these symptoms. It is especially important to call us right away if your pig stops eating or producing a normal amount of fecal pellets.

We recommend yearly exams to evaluate the overall health of your pig. Like most prey species, guinea pigs are adept at hiding signs of disease. Predators target obviously sick or weakened animals and guinea pigs will pretend they are well until they become too sick to hide it any longer. A yearly physical exam will help us catch a problem before it becomes too severe.