



# Introduction to Guinea Pig Care

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Guinea pigs make wonderful pets! They are relatively easy to care for and will give you lots of love and affection in return. They are very interactive, trainable, and need daily attention.

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## Housing

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.

Line the bottom of the cage with newspaper or paper towels. Place shredded paper, or recycled paper shavings (such as Carefresh) on top for bedding. The bedding must be kept clean. Replace it as often as possible to avoid ammonia build-up from urine. Depending on how much your pig urinates, how many pigs you have, and how big your enclosure is, the bedding will need to be changed every 3-7 days. NOTE: Wood shavings can harbor mites and cause itchy skin, so do not use them.

Clean the entire cage at least once a week. If you can smell the cage (especially the urine), it needs to be cleaned. You can use a mild antibacterial soap to wash the cage. Rinse thoroughly with hot water. This method of cleaning is appropriate for regular maintenance.

When you are trying to prevent illness, you need to disinfect the cage. To disinfect, rinse it first with a mixture of diluted bleach (1 capful to 1 gallon of water) and then rinse again with hot water.



## Enrichment

Guinea pigs need a place to hide within their cage. Provide a "house" or box made of plastic where your pig can retreat when she wants to sleep or hide. When pigs do not have a place to hide, they can become stressed and more prone to illness. If you have multiple pigs, provide a house for each pig.

Provide various toys to entertain your pig when she is alone. Cardboard oatmeal canisters, paper towel rolls, and wooden chew toys are some good options. Guinea pigs love to chew, so fruit tree branches (like apple) that are not chemically treated are a great choice. Be sure to change the toys you offer to prevent your pig from becoming bored.

## Diet

Guinea pigs require a vegetarian diet. They should have access to dry, clean, timothy hay or orchard grass in unlimited quantities. Be sure to give a fresh handful daily per pig.

They should also receive a handful of fresh leafy greens daily. It is important to offer a mixture of at least three types of greens. Dandelion greens, parsley, red and green leaf lettuces, field greens, cilantro, and carrot tops are great choices. Other vegetables like green, red, and orange peppers, cucumbers, and carrots are also recommended. Vegetables that can be fed sparingly include kale, collard greens, spinach, broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower.

A small amount of timothy-hay-based guinea pig pellets can also be offered daily. Feed approximately one tablespoon of pelleted food daily. NEVER feed unlimited amounts of pelleted food! This will cause your pig to be overweight and will predispose her to dental problems. Oxbow Animal Health makes a very good pelleted food for guinea pigs.

Be sure to avoid alfalfa hay and pellets. They are high in calcium and calories and too low in fiber. The calcium in alfalfa can predispose your pig to the formation of bladder and urethral stones. If you have a very young or thin pig, we may recommend alfalfa hay for the short term.

Young guinea pigs quickly develop dietary preferences. Offer juveniles a variety of foods to prevent them from refusing new foods later in life. If you need to change your adult pig's pelleted food, he or she may go on a hunger strike and refuse the new food. It is important to watch for this because a guinea pig that is not eating can become seriously ill quickly.

We do not recommend feeding dried fruits, nuts/seeds, fresh fruits, flowers, yogurt drops, or other sweet and carbohydrate-rich items to your guinea pig. Fresh strawberries and apples can be fed sparingly as a treat, but they can cause digestive issues if given too much.

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



Unlimited

Moderate Quantity

Small Quantity

## Vitamin C

Guinea pigs require vitamin C daily. Unlike most other animals, guinea pigs, humans, and some species of bats cannot make this vitamin themselves. Peppers are a great source of natural vitamin C. Guinea pigs that do not have enough vitamin C in their diet can develop scurvy. Signs of the disease include bleeding gums, inflamed joints, loose teeth, and heart disease. In the worst cases, bones become weak and tend to break even under normal wear. In general, we recommend 50 mg of vitamin C per day for health maintenance.

## Exercise

Your guinea pig needs to exercise daily. Take her out of the cage and allow her to run around in a contained, safe area. Make sure that there is no access to cords (electrical or other) as pigs love to bite them. Take care to ensure that the area is free of items that she can eat or chew. At least 30 minutes of activity daily will provide good exercise for your pig.

## Spay & Neuter

Spaying can prevent some medical conditions in guinea pigs, but it is not as critical as it is for pet rabbits. Neutering a male pig will sometimes help to reduce aggression. Female pigs that are not spayed commonly develop ovarian cysts and may show signs of heat. We recommend discussing the benefits and risks of spaying or neutering with your veterinarian.

## Breeding

Female 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 she will need a cesarean section.

Females will go into heat within 30 minutes of giving birth! Be sure to separate the male and female before she gives birth. Young 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.

## Heatstroke

Guinea pigs have thick fur, making them susceptible to heatstroke. It is important to keep in mind that summer weather which feels for you might be too hot for your pig. When the temperature climbs into the upper 70's and higher, it's time to think about cooling off your pig. One way to do this is to place blocks of ice in the cage (soda bottles filled with water work well). Bowls of ice cubes are also fine.

A fan or air conditioner in the guinea pig's room is the best way to bring down the temperature. Be sure that the fan or air conditioner is not blowing directly on your pig's cage. Another option is to move your pig(s) to a cool basement on very hot days.

If you notice any signs of heatstroke. wrap your pig in a cool (not cold) wet towel and call us immediately:

- Rapid breathing
- Bright red ears
- Lethargy/lying on her side
- Thick/stringy saliva
- Diarrhea

Heatstroke is a very serious condition that can quickly lead to death. Seek help right away!

## Signs of Illness

Call us if you notice any of the following signs of disease:

- Runny eyes/nose
- Sneezing/heavy breathing
- diarrhea/bloated abdomen
- loss of appetite
- lameness/pain



- decreased activity
- blood in urine

Hair loss and itchiness can be of particular concern for guinea pigs. They can contract mites from bedding and hay, as well as ringworm. Ringworm is a fungus that is contagious to people and other pets. If your pig has any hair loss or becomes itchy, be sure to schedule an appointment.

It is especially important to call us right away if your pig stops eating or stops producing a normal amount of fecal pellets. This can be a very serious condition called ileus, or G.I. stasis. There is no time to waste with these symptoms. If your guinea pig does not eat on their regular schedule -- CALL US!

## **Preventive Care**

We highly recommend that you bring your guinea pig in for a yearly check-up. Guinea pigs are very good at hiding signs of disease until it is too late. We may be able to catch a problem early on when it is still treatable.

An annual fecal examination (a test run from a stool sample) is recommended. Contaminated hay and leafy greens may contain intestinal parasites which can cause problems for your pig.