

# CARE AND FEEDING OF GUINEA PIGS

**Hilary S. Stern, DVM**  
Animal Hospital of Soquel  
2651 Soquel Avenue, Santa Cruz CA 95062

Guinea pigs, *Cavia porcellus*, are rodents that are related to chinchillas and porcupines. They originate from the Andes Mountains region of South America. During the 16th century, Dutch explorers introduced guinea pigs to Europe where they were selectively bred by fanciers. To this day the guinea pig remains a very popular pet due to its docile temperament, tendency not to bite or scratch, and clean, quiet nature.

Guinea pigs are sociable animals and tend to live in groups. If you keep two or more females together, they'll become great friends. If you want two males, it's smart to choose two babies from the same litter. Groups of unrelated adult males tend to fight, and are best not housed together. Female pigs can become pregnant at 6 weeks of age, so keep males and females separated, or have your male guinea pigs neutered. If you are planning to breed a female guinea pig, make sure she has her first litter while still young. If they are not bred before 7 months of age, female pigs will require cesarean section deliveries.

Many parents select a guinea pig as a first pet for their child, believing a small pet needs only a small amount of care. It is important to understand that these little guys have lots of requirements, including a roomy cage, specialized diet, daily cleanup, and gentle handling. While guinea pigs do make great pets for kids, it is important that a responsible adult is in charge their care.

## Feeding Your Guinea Pig

An appropriate diet includes limited amounts of a pelleted diet formulated for guinea pigs, high-quality grass hay (e.g. timothy, oat, or orchard grass), and ample fresh vegetables. Pellets should not be fed free choice, as sedentary guinea pigs can become overweight with unlimited feeding. Offer 1/8 cup of pellets per day for a 2 pound guinea pig. Hay should be available at all times. At least 1/2 -1 cup of fresh leafy greens or other vitamin C rich vegetables should be offered daily.

For guinea pigs younger than 6 months and for pregnant sows, the above diet should be supplemented with unlimited alfalfa-based pellets and daily amounts of alfalfa hay. Alfalfa is high in protein and calcium, which makes it beneficial for growing and lactating guinea pigs. Alfalfa is not appropriate as an adult maintenance diet, as it can contribute to obesity and bladder stones.

As for what to avoid feeding your piggy pets? Stay away from gourmet pellet mixes that contain dried fruits, nuts, grains, or seeds. These high carbohydrate diets can lead to gastrointestinal problems and obesity. Cereal grains or sugary foods such as yogurt drops should also be avoided.

Guinea pigs are unique among rodents in that they need to eat foods rich in vitamin C every day. Although guinea pig pellets are formulated to contain vitamin C, it degrades quickly and may be absent even 6 weeks after the milling date. Therefore, supplemental sources of vitamin C are a must. Scurvy, a disease caused by vitamin C deficiency, is still one of the most common diseases seen in pet guinea pigs fed a strictly commercial pelleted diet. To ensure that a guinea pig is receiving the proper amount of vitamin C, supplement a diet of hay and pellets with plenty of fresh vegetables. Vitamin C rich vegetables such as kale, cabbage, dandelion greens, parsley, collard greens, bell peppers, and mustard greens are great choices. Fruit should be limited to less than a tablespoon per day. While many guinea pigs like fruit as a treat, it is not a natural part of their diet, and too much can cause gastrointestinal problems. For those pets reluctant to eat their vegetables, vitamin C supplementation is necessary. These guinea pigs should be offered 50 mg of vitamin C per day. Oxbow makes a chewable vitamin C tablet designed specifically for guinea pigs, or owners can use a supplement made for children. Supplementing vitamin C in the water is not very effective due the rapid breakdown of the vitamin.

Guinea pigs are creatures of habit and may not tolerate sudden changes in the presentation, taste, odor, texture or form of their food and water. Any changes to a guinea pigs diet should be made gradually. This applies to the food or water containers as well. Failure to make changes gradually can result in your pet refusing to eat and drink.

Guinea pigs are notorious for tipping over water dishes and soiling them. Water is therefore best offered in a water bottle equipped with a 'sipper' tube. Even so, guinea pigs can contaminate and clog their water bottles by chewing on the end of the sipper tube and 'backwashing' food particles into it. For this reason, water containers must be cleaned and refilled daily. To ensure that your pet gets plenty to drink, don't add vitamins to the water, as some pigs don't like the taste.

## **Housing for Guinea Pigs**

Guinea pigs are best housed in well-ventilated wire-sided cages with solid bottoms. Wire-bottom cages are not ideal because they can entrap limbs, and can lead to foot abrasions and infections. Your pig's cage should be large enough for her to move about unencumbered. As a rule of thumb, provide at least four square feet of cage space per guinea pig. Provide a comfortable hide box within the cage. Guinea pigs aren't good jumpers, and a cage with 12" sides is sufficient to keep your pet safe inside. However, if there are other pets or children in the home who might bother your pet, make sure the cage also has a sturdy cover.

Your guinea pig's cage should be kept clean and dry, and should be lined with a soft, nontoxic bedding. Beddings that contain aromatic oils (e.g. cedar and pine shavings) should not be used, as they can irritate your guinea pig's eyes and nose, and can be hard on her feet. Recycled paper products such as shredded paper, Carefresh®, or Yesterday's News® are preferred. Soiled bedding should be removed and replaced with fresh materials as often as is necessary to keep your pets clean and dry. A complete cage cleaning should be performed at least twice a week. Weighted food bowls help to discourage tipping and thus keep the cage cleaner. Clean food bowls regularly. Most guinea pigs readily accept water from a sipper bottle, which helps to keep the cage cleaner and drier than does a bowl. Make sure to clean the bottle and replace the water daily, checking each time that the sipper tube has not become clogged.

Guinea pigs are native to high elevations in the Andes Mountains, and are unable to tolerate heat. They should never be kept at temperatures exceeding 80 F. High humidity will exacerbate a guinea pig's tendency to develop heat stroke.

## Preventative Medicine

Being a prey species in the wild, guinea pigs are adept at hiding illness, and routine evaluations by a qualified veterinarian may help in detecting abnormalities early. Therefore, all guinea pig owners are encouraged to have an annual exam which includes an oral exam and appropriate testing.

## Vital Statistics

Scientific name	<i>Cavia porcellus</i>
Usual life span as a pet	5-6 years
Desirable environmental temperature range	65-75 F
Age of sexual maturity	males = 3 months; females = 2 months
Recommended age at first breeding	males = 3-4 months; females = less than 3-7 months (not after 7 months)
Length of estrous cycle	15-17 days
Gestation period (pregnancy)	59-72 days (averages 68 days)
Average litter size	usually 2-4 young (possible range 1-13)
Age at weaning	3 weeks

