

## Guinea Pigs

Are you considering a guinea pig as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Guinea pigs are high-maintenance pets. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$500 each year for a single, healthy guinea pig. The average lifespan for a guinea pig is 4-7 years. Guinea pigs need the opportunity to socialize and exercise outside of their cage for at least 2 hours every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance. Follow these guidelines for basic guinea pig husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



### Housing

The minimum recommended cage or pen size is 36" L x 24" W x 18" H. It provides room for running, possibly climbing multiple levels, foraging, hiding, food, water, a hay box, and possibly a litter box. Cage bottoms should be solid rather than wire to prevent painful foot ulcers. To keep your piggy happy and healthy, provide environmental enrichments, such as tunnels, and activities such as chewing and foraging. Keep them in a social area of the house but away from kitchen fumes/smells, loudspeakers, and direct sunlight.

### Bedding and Litter

Fleece, towels, or blankets (with no loose threads) may be used if changed daily. You can also use aspen wood shavings, recycled newspaper beddings, wood stove pellets, or hemp bedding. Never use pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter, as these products can be toxic to guinea pigs.

### Litter Training

Some guinea pigs can be successfully litter trained if started at a young age. Start by putting a very low-sided litter box in the corner of the cage that your guinea pig is naturally using as a toilet. Provide a different type of bedding in the litter box from the rest of the cage.

### Grooming

It is best to avoid baths as they can interfere with guinea pigs' natural skin oils. When possible, use a damp cloth to spot clean. Nails need trimming approximately every two months. Use cat or small mammal nail trimmers and snip the end off while avoiding the vein that comes out partway into the nail. Longhaired guinea pigs require regular brushing to prevent hair matting.

## House-proofing

Guinea pigs do not have the ability to vomit, so anything they ingest must pass through their entire system. Be sure to provide safe food and toys, and keep them away from potential hazards such as houseplants, wires, cords, loose carpet strands, rubber bands, etc.

## Food & Water

Guinea pigs' teeth are constantly growing and kept worn by chewing hay, so always provide unlimited hay. They also produce two types of droppings, one of which is not feces and is ingested to absorb essential nutrients. Guinea pigs are herbivores. Their dietary needs change with age:

Under 6 months:

- Unlimited Alfalfa-based pellets every day.
- Unlimited Alfalfa hay.

Over 6 months (Adults):

- 1/8 cup of timothy-based pellets every day. These pellets should not be the ones made for rabbits. Guinea pigs should not eat rabbit food.
- Unlimited timothy hay.
- Make dietary transition slowly: mix new products with the old one at first.

Additional Nutritional Requirements:

- Fresh veggies: 3 servings of ½ - 1 cup of greens per day. Good greens include romaine lettuce, dandelion, carrot tops, parsley, basil, dill, kale, spinach, broccoli, green peppers, and tomatoes.
- Treats: 1-2 Tbsp per 2 lbs body weight per week. Serve carrots, strawberries, watermelon, apple, and papaya. Limit bananas, grapes, and dried fruit, as they are extremely high in sugar.
- Supplements: Guinea pigs need a daily supplement of vitamin C. Guinea pig pellets often have added vitamin C, but the vitamin will begin to dissipate as soon as the bag is opened. It is best to supplement vitamin C with chewable tablets available at pet stores. Fruits such as apples and oranges are high in vitamin C, as are red peppers. Do not use vitamin C drops that are added to water, as the vitamin levels are unstable and will dissipate, and this can change the flavour of water and may discourage your guinea pig from drinking.
- Common toxic foods include coffee, chocolate, potatoes, green beans, avocados, and most houseplants. Avoid feeding "people food" and nuts as they can cause digestive problems.

Water: Use an easily accessible bowl to provide fresh water daily. Bowls are closer to how a guinea pig would naturally drink water in the wild, and they are much easier for you to clean regularly.

## Allergies

If you or a member of your household suffers from seasonal allergies, you might be allergic to the food, or bedding guinea pigs use. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products before adopting a guinea pig.

## Health Care

### Veterinary Care

Veterinary costs can be more expensive than that of cats and dogs. Guinea pigs are considered an exotic species and must be treated by a qualified exotics veterinarian. While guinea pigs do not require vaccinations, they should see the vet for yearly exams or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to Adopting: Find a guinea pig-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their prices for check-ups and other standard procedures.

### Common Medical Concerns

Since guinea pigs are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. If your guinea pig stops eating and producing droppings for even 12 hours, it requires immediate veterinary attention. Signs of illness may include but are not limited to: respiratory issues (wheezing, sneezing, heavy breathing), head tilt, tumours, cysts, injury/discomfort, blood in stool and/or urine, drooling, and any change in eating/drinking/elimination.

## Guinea Pig Behaviour

### Origins

Domestic guinea pigs are the descendants of the wild cavies of the Andes, South America. They were first domesticated for food as early as 5000 BCE, kept by Andean tribes. Guinea pigs made the step from livestock to pet in 1547, when Queen Elizabeth I kept one as a pet, inspiring a trend in Western Europe.

### Psychology

Since guinea pigs are prey animals, they are at the bottom of the food chain: everything can eat them, and they are never safe. This dramatically shapes the way they see the world. Guinea pigs need to feel safe and secure, have spots for hiding, and are most comfortable with all four feet planted safely on the ground.

### Bonding With Your Guinea Pig

Guinea pigs generally dislike being picked up but can enjoy being pet or sitting firmly on your lap once they trust you. Feeding healthy treats is a good way to gain your new pet's trust. Respect your piggy's boundaries. They can be nervous, so be gentle, take it slow, avoid sudden movements, and let them come to you. Giving (healthy) treats is a good way to begin establishing trust. Guinea pigs are social animals. The most important thing to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with him/her every day and provide plenty of toys inside and outside the cage.

### One or Two?

Guinea pigs are naturally social animals and benefit from companionship, so housing two guinea pigs of the same gender or spayed/neutered together is an option to consider. Once bonds are formed, they should never be broken. Separated guinea pigs can develop depression, so if one pig passes away, you can try to re-bond it immediately with a new one. If you would like to try to bond two unfamiliar guinea pigs, consult one of the many resources available first. Bonding unfamiliar guinea pigs can be tricky and must be approached with caution.



### Handling

When picking up a guinea pig, use both hands and support its chest and hind-end securely. Guinea pigs prefer to be held level (horizontally) as they are evenly weighted. Dropping a guinea pig can cause serious injury, so if a guinea pig is struggling, put it down.

### Understanding Guinea Pig Behaviour and Vocalizations:

- Wheek or Whistle: An expression of general excitement. It may occur in the presence of a caregiver, or in anticipation of a treat.
- Bubbling or Purring: Enjoyment, such as when being petted. May also make this sound when grooming, exploring a new place at leisure, or when eating something enjoyable.
- Chattering: This sound is made by rapidly gnashing teeth and is a warning. If pressed, this guinea pig will bite.
- Squealing or Shrieking: Discontent, or response to pain or danger, or anticipation of either.
- Eyes bulging backed into a corner: Fear and stress.
- Inactivity: Depression or sign of illness.
- Jumping in quick spurts: Expression of pure joy, called 'popcorning'.
- Chutting/Whining: Sounds made in a pursuit situation between two guinea pigs.