

Guinea Pig Care

Diet

Guinea pigs, in their natural habitat, eat different types of vegetation. Guinea pigs are herbivores and although they digest fibre more efficiently than rabbits, they still need a specially formulated, nutritionally balanced guinea pig food which is high in **fibre** to maintain a healthy gut and help wear down their continually growing teeth. Food must also include Vitamin C as guinea pigs cannot generate their own and will fall ill without it. Together with a plentiful supply of good quality hay and small quantities of fresh vegetables, will supply sufficient vitamins, minerals and plant fibre to your pet.

Foods to avoid or limit - Iceberg lettuce (may cause stomach upset), severely limit cruciferous vegetables like cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower (may cause gas).

Selective Feeding - sometimes your guinea pig may eat only certain ingredients in a muesli diet, therefore missing out on vital nutrients. To solve this problem, feed a mono component diet, with all the ingredients in easy to eat, tasty biscuits.



Teeth

Guinea pigs have teeth which **continue to grow** throughout their lives. Overgrowth of the teeth can cause great difficulty in eating or stop your pet from eating at all. Signs that there are problems with the teeth are:

- the mouth hanging open slightly or "slobbers" where the hair under the chin may be wet because they can no longer close their mouth completely.
- Weight loss - if your guinea pig is not eating due to the overgrowth of their teeth, they can quickly lose weight.

Weight

Monitoring your guinea pigs weight on a weekly basis, is one of the most important things you can do for your pet.

It is very important to maintain the correct weight for your pet pig – too heavy and they are prone to problems such as bumblefoot, arthritis, heart disease, and diabetes; too light and they can develop weakness and muscle atrophy.

Fortunately, when fed properly and given ample exercise, most pigs will “self-regulate” to a healthy weight, but how do you know if your pig is too chubby? Thanks to the already rectangular shape of the guinea pig body and natural lack of a waist, combined with their thick haired coat, it can be a little bit of a challenge to tell what is lurking under the surface. The easiest way to tell the status of your pigs’ fat stores is to regularly run your hands down the entire length of the body, starting right behind the ears. In a well proportioned pig, you will be able to feel both the ribs and the backbone going “bump-bump-bump” under your fingers. These bumps should not be sharp or obvious, but palpable. If you are unable to feel those bumps – the fat stores are too thick and your pig is too chubby. If the bumps are very noticeable, then your pig may be too skinny. Both underweight and overweight pigs may have underlying medical conditions resulting in their abnormal fat stores, and should be evaluated by a vet.

- One ounce weight fluctuation is OK.
- Two ounces - Go on alert.
- Three ounces - Extreme red alert.
- Four ounces - Get the pig to a vet.

Worming

Like other animals, your guinea pig can easily ingest the eggs of parasitic worms with roundworms and tapeworms being the common ones. They can have a serious impact on your pet's general health with their skin, coat and appetite being affected. The pig's belly may appear bloated and you may notice roundworms or tapeworm segments in your pet's faeces.

Flea/ Mite prevention

Guinea pigs can suffer from mites and lice. The most common of these parasites will only be found on guinea pigs and are *species specific*, meaning they cannot be transmitted to people or other species of animals. The most common parasite is the **Mange Mite**. This mite can cause excruciating pain and needs prompt treatment.

Signs that your guinea pig may have mites or lice are:

- repeated scratching.
- hair loss and skin sores
- dandruff



All parasites can easily be passed from one guinea pig to another so all guinea pigs must be treated and their living quarters cleaned thoroughly.

Neutering

Neutering is not necessary in most situations unless there is a medical condition affecting the reproductive organs that would benefit from having the procedure. It might be a consideration if you insist on housing a male and female guinea pig together but don't want them to reproduce but it does not affect the natural sexual aggression of males who may fight. In this case, housing males pigs separately may be necessary rather than a neutering procedure.

General Husbandry

Guinea pigs can be kept outdoors all year round but are very susceptible to extremes of temperature. They should be brought into a shed or unused garage during the winter months (never put your guinea pig in a used garage as the exhaust fumes from a car can be very dangerous).



A hutch should be draught free and fully weatherproof (a hutch shield provides extra protection from bad weather) and should be raised off the ground to keep the floor dry and to protect your pet from cats and foxes. The hutch should have plenty of shade and a nest box should be provided to give your pig a sense of security. They are also prey animals so any enclosure used outdoors must have netting or a screen over the top to stop other animals making a meal of your pet!

Water should be available at all times and if the outdoor space does not have grass, a good pile of Timothy hay to forage through will create the ideal environment.

If you choose to keep your pig indoors, a large cage specifically designed for guinea pigs with a good base layer of woodshavings to form an absorbent layer, will provide a good home. However, your guinea pig will need space to exercise so a large, safe space either in your garden or in a safe room in your house, will keep them happy and in good shape. Any indoor play area should be "pig-proof" so they can play safely on the floor (ensure they can't get to electrical cables or escape through vents or other holes located low to the floor and that they can't get stuck behind or under any appliances or furniture).

If you have children, adult-supervised care and handling should be a strict rule, but children can learn much about gentleness, compassion and responsibility when they are involved in caring for them.

Behaviour

Guinea pigs have interesting and very individualistic personalities and can become very attached to their owners. They are active during the morning and evenings and tend to sleep during mid-day and at night.

In the wild, guinea pigs find greater safety living in a group as they can watch and warn each other about approaching danger with their loud squeals which is why it is recommended that guinea pigs are bought in pairs. They can become lonely and depressed if they live by themselves, particularly if they don't receive plenty of handling and attention from their owners.

Because guinea pigs are herd animals, they do have a social order. There will be a dominant personality in any group and the other pigs will respect the dominant pig.

Guinea pigs like to play so you can experiment with different objects to see how they react to them. Tubes and other toys can enhance their wellbeing and environment.



