

Caring For Your Guinea Pig

Guinea pigs can make great pets, especially as an introduction to pets for children, as they are generally non-aggressive and docile and rarely bite or scratch. They will become responsive to attention if handled frequently with gentle patting and handling. They have an average life span of 3 to 5 years.

WHAT TO FEED YOUR GUINEA PIG

Guinea pigs are most active in the morning and the evening and it is best to provide most of their food at these times. This should include a variety of green leafy vegetables and a small amount of guinea pig pellets (try to avoid too many pellets as this can lead to obesity and poorly formed faeces). Hay should also be offered to graze on throughout the day - a high fibre diet is important to encourage well-formed faeces and also to encourage chewing (guinea pigs have continually erupting teeth and rely on chewing to keep teeth worn to the right length). Avoid foods high in carbohydrates or sugar as they provide nutrients for the "bad" bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, enabling them to increase in number. These foods include bread, cereal, oats, biscuits, chips and sugary treats.

Guinea pigs are one of few species (including humans) that need supplemental vitamin C. Specially formulated guinea pig pellets should have added vitamin C but they should not be stored for more than 3 months as the nutrient value can be lost beyond that. Feeding a quarter of an orange a day will provide the daily vitamin C requirements - it may take 3-4 weeks of offering the orange in a variety of forms before your guinea pig will accept it. Capsicum or a handful of cabbage can also be good sources of vitamin C or alternatively you can give 30-50mg of a chewable vitamin C tablet in water via dropper (do not add it to your guinea pig's regular water supply as they are quite fussy and may be put off their water). Guinea pigs deficient in vitamin C will have crusty eyes, a rough hair coat, poor growth, lethargy and possible pain and malformation of the legs.

Guinea pigs like to stand on the edges of their feed bowls so that heavy feed bowls are recommended so they do not tip them over. They also like to scatter their feed and water so it is recommended that their feed bowls be elevated above their bedding. The bowls should be cleaned out daily.

Guinea pigs are fastidious animals and develop rigid behaviour patterns. Any changes in feed and water (and the containers they are in) should be made gradually as even minor changes can cause them to stop eating or drinking.

HOW TO HOUSE YOUR GUINEA PIG

Guinea pigs rarely climb or jump out of open top cages higher than 18cm and so can usually safely be housed without lids on enclosures, provided there is no threat of predators (eg the neighbourhood cat).

Good ventilation is important as guinea pigs produce a lot of urine daily and ammonia levels can build up, leading to respiratory disease - wire cages are therefore preferred over aquariums. Cages with wire bottoms should have a small mesh wire

to avoid the guinea pigs getting their feet caught. Also, provide a platform of wood or cardboard that enables them to have some time off the wire. A cage housing one guinea pig should ideally be at least 50cm x 60cm, or for 2 or 3 guinea pigs 50cm x 75cm, with a (well ventilated) hide box for shelter at one end. Those guinea pigs housed in cages should be allowed regular exercise in a larger, safe area. Bedding can be provided in the form of recycled newspaper kitty litter or straw/hay (though this does not absorb urine as well). Try to avoid wood shavings as they can lead to respiratory and skin problems. Try to spot clean the cage daily and give it a complete change at least once a week. Toys can help to provide stimulation in your guinea pig's environment - toilet rolls, cardboard boxes and untreated wood are inexpensive. Toys for large birds (as long as they can't be chewed apart or don't have sharp parts to them) are also good.

YOUR GUINEA PIG AND OTHER PETS

Guinea pigs can mix well with other pets including cats, dogs and rabbits. Introductions should be made slowly however and all interactions should be supervised.

Guinea pigs that have not been raised together can be aggressive towards one another, especially two unneutered males. Introductions should be made in a neutral territory where neither animal feels particularly at home. As guinea pigs are social animals they are better housed in twos or threes than as solo pets.

BREEDING

Guinea pigs have a pregnancy of about 63 days. Baby guinea pigs are born fairly well developed - they are fully furred, have teeth and can eat and drink from pans within hours of birth.

If planning to breed from your female guinea pig it is important that they have their first litter by 7-8 months of age (they reach breeding age at 3-4 months). This is because their pelvis, which normally separates during pregnancy/birth, separates less easily when they are more mature and this plus the formation of fat pads in the pelvic canal can lead to problems during birth.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

The most common problems we see in guinea pigs at the clinic are dental, skin and gastrointestinal.

Guinea pigs have continually erupting teeth and rely on chewing to keep them worn down. They will sometimes develop overgrown teeth (especially the molars) if they aren't chewing enough or are chewing unevenly. It is important to provide a high fibre diet (lots of hay) and pieces of untreated wood to encourage chewing. Vegetables and roots with the dirt still on them can also help wear teeth down.

Skin problems in guinea pigs can be a reflection of an inappropriate diet (i.e. inadequate vitamin C) but are often due to mites. Mites tend to make guinea pigs very itchy and distressed which can lead to a lot of scratching and self trauma to the skin. Fortunately these can now be treated fairly easily.

Guinea pigs can be prone to diarrhoea, most commonly due to a proliferation of the "bad" bacteria in the gut following a period of stress or being given inappropriate food or medication.

Guinea pigs can develop bladder stones. This is a condition seen more in males but affects both sexes and leads to blood in the urine and pain and crying on urination. In some cases increasing fluid intake can help, others need surgical intervention to remove the stones.