



HOUSING A GUINEA PIG

The Habitat

Guinea Pigs should be housed in the largest enclosure possible which is used primarily as a “home-base” for when there is no direct supervision. The bottom of the habitat should be solid plexiglass, stainless steel, or hard plastic. Avoid habitats with wire bottoms. When able habitats should also include multiple (at least 2) sources of clean, fresh water and an area for them to hide, which is essential in managing stressors for prey species. Play yards are a great way to expand the guinea pig’s environment and support proper physical exercise and enrichment.



Bedding/litter

Use only naturally colored paper-based products (i.e. Carefresh, Oxbow Pure Comfort, Yesterday’s News), newspaper, or computer paper in the litter box and cage. Many people use towels/fleece as an alternative bedding/liner in the enclosure but care must be taken to ensure that the guinea pig is not chewing and eating them. The habitat and litter box should be kept clean, with feces and dirty/wet bedding removed daily. Clay/clumping cat litter and natural wood shavings can cause eye, skin, and respiratory problems and are generally not recommended.

Litter Box Training

Some guinea pigs are able to be litter box trained which helps a great deal when monitoring their health and with clean-up! Encouraging guinea pigs to use a litter box can take some patience but can be accomplished by putting a few fecal pellets inside, and then placing the box in the guinea pig’s favorite place to eliminate in the habitat (this is typically a corner). A litter box should be available at all times.

Cleaning the Habitat

In addition to removing waste and soiled/wet bedding daily, more thorough cleaning of the habitat and its fixtures (water bottles/bowls, food dishes, etc) should be performed daily to every few days, depending on the size of the enclosure. During the “deep cleans” a guinea pig should be moved to a separate location, and the cage components washed with hot soapy water or dilute bleach (approximately 1:30 bleach to water ratio) and then rinsed and dried. Regular cleaning will reduce contact with waste and associated aerosolized debris which can cause skin and respiratory tract irritation.



BEHAVIOR

Enrichment

Just as it is important to fuel a guinea pig's body with proper nutrition for physical health, mental health and well-being is an equally important factor when considering total pet health. Animals can be enriched nutritionally, behaviorally, and physically by allowing the expression and engagement of natural behaviors within a captive setting. For guinea pigs, key natural behaviors to promote are playing, hiding, chewing, and exploring. To keep interest and provide maximum engagement, multiple enrichment items should be present simultaneously within the habitat/living area and they should be rotated frequently (at least once a month).

Handling

Like rabbits, it is best to interact with Guinea pigs on the floor. If handling is necessary, the animal should be supported with two hands (one under the chest and one supporting its hindquarters) and held gently but securely close to your body. Guinea pigs are small and delicate animals, so a general recommendation is to not have young children carry a guinea pig as they may squeeze too tightly or accidentally drop him or her. Guinea pigs, like all small animals, should be gradually desensitized to handling practices to limit stress and fear, as being carried is not a natural state for them.

Playtime

Guinea pigs enjoy interaction with trusted humans in a safe, calm space and are gregarious, entertaining companions. They should have daily, supervised time outside of their enclosure and be provided with appropriate chews/items to safely provide mental, behavioral, and nutritional enrichment.

Safety

Supervise a guinea pig when it is outside of its cage; do not allow your guinea pig to chew on items such as carpeting, furniture, or electrical wires. Safe items, such as cardboard, unvarnished baskets, and untreated wood can be offered to encourage healthy chewing. Guinea Pig proofing an area is an important part of responsible pet ownership. Key areas of Guinea Pig proofing include keeping electrical cords out of reach via plastic tubing or other protective coverings, moving potentially toxic house plants out of the area, and covering or making baseboards or other wooden furniture inaccessible. Providing safe and fun chewing alternatives will assist in redirecting their natural chewing behavior to appropriate outlets. Temperature control is important for all species, including guinea pigs, and the habitat should be kept out of direct sunlight and drafts.



If any new animals are brought into an established environment, they should always be quarantined initially as a safety measure to prevent any infectious agents from being introduced.

Roommates

Guinea pigs are extremely social animals and, whenever possible, should have a same species/sex companion. If introducing two new animals to each other, a slow introduction process should be completed over several days under supervision, closely observing body language and anxiety levels:

- Place in separate, but side by side, enclosures for limited interaction
- Supervised direct interaction in a neutral space (such as a play yard)
- Introduction into joint habitat, closely monitoring for aggression, fear, or other indicators of trouble with assimilation.

DIET

Hay

This should always be offered in unlimited quantities; a guinea pig should never be without hay. Timothy, orchard grass, oat hay, or meadow grass can all be offered. *Avoid* alfalfa and other hays high in calcium in pets over 6 months of age, as these may predispose to development of excess urinary bladder sediment. Providing a variety of grass hays for adult animals can increase interest (and therefore consumption) of hay as well as decrease natural picky tendencies that guinea pigs can exhibit with natural variations in hay from bag to bag.

Pellets

Pellets should be offered in recommended amounts to supplement the diet of hay. Use a timothy hay-based uniform pellet. *Avoid* pellets mixed with seeds and dried fruits, as guinea pigs are concentrate selectors and will naturally select the high fat seeds and sweet items while leaving the pellets which often contain essential micronutrients. Selecting a high quality fortified, uniform, and age-specific guinea pig pellet ensures the animal receives the same nutrition in every bite that is specifically formulated for its age and species. Follow the feeding guidelines on the pellet package unless otherwise directed by your pet's veterinarian.

It should also be noted that any abrupt changes in your guinea pig's diet can cause digestive upset and other health problems. If it is necessary to transition from one diet to the next, transitions should be gradual and over at least a 4-week period.



Vitamin C

Guinea pigs are unique in that they require Vitamin C to be supplemented in their diet (rather than producing it themselves). A high quality, species and age specific fortified uniform pellet with a stabilized version of Vitamin C is sufficient to meet the needs of most animals. However, additional supplementation may be required if your guinea pig had elevated needs as identified by your veterinarian OR if the Vitamin C source in your pellets is not a stabilized version (and thus, has the propensity to degrade over time with the storage of the product).

Fresh greens

Offer approximately 1 cup of leafy greens per 2 pounds of your guinea pig's weight per day. Good choices include the following: romaine lettuce, red/green leaf lettuce, escarole, watercress, clover, bok choy, endive, and turnip tops. While small infrequent amounts are okay avoid offering too much dandelion, collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, kale, spinach or Swiss chard due to their high calcium and/or oxalate content, which may predispose them to excess urinary bladder sediment/stones. A good rule of thumb is that darker greens tend to have higher calcium levels and should be avoided.

Water

Fresh water should be offered at all times and offered from two sources such as a bottle and spill-proof dish/bowl. Water bottles should be checked often for continued function, as they can easily become jammed or stop working. It is recommended to offer both a water bottle and a crock within the habitat, as some animals prefer one over the other and encouraging hydration is very important.

An overall basic diet guide can be found in the table below:

Guinea Pig Weight (lbs)	Grass Hay	Pellets (Cups)	Greens (Cups)	Vegetables (Tbsps)
1	Unlimited	1/8	0.5	0.5
2	Unlimited	1/8	1	1
3	Unlimited	1/8	1.5	1.5
4	Unlimited	1/8	2	2
5	Unlimited	1/8	2.5	2.5
6	Unlimited	1/8	3	3

Healthy young animals (Guinea pigs under 6 months and rabbits under 1 year) can be fed pellets ad libitum and be fed alfalfa hay to help support growth.



HEALTH AND PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE

Finding A Guinea Pig-Savvy Veterinarian

It is important to locate a veterinary office before welcoming a guinea pig to the household comfortable seeing guinea pigs, which can be challenging.

- Boarded-specialists specializing in exotic companion mammals can be found by visiting the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners' webpage (<https://abvp.com/animal-owners/find-an-abvp-specialist/>)
- Veterinarians who have a particular interest in small exotic mammals can be found by visiting the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians' webpage (www.aemv.org).

Examinations

It is recommended that all newly acquired guinea pigs receive a complete physical examination. Thereafter, you should have your pet examined by a veterinarian every 6-12 months and as soon as any signs of illness/disease are noted. Beginning at the age of three years, annual blood work is recommended in order to assist with early detection of disease. Early treatment of disease processes is essential to promoting a long and healthy life.

Changes in appetite or defecation

Guinea Pigs need to be constantly eating and defecating. If there are any changes to appetite or stool size/number that is noticed for a period >4 hours, a call to a veterinarian is warranted. Reduced appetite or reduced/no feces is usually considered a same day medical emergency in Guinea Pigs and referred to as, gastrointestinal stasis (ie, slowing down of the gut's normal movements). If not addressed in time, GI stasis can be fatal.

Cecotrophs

Soft, mucus-covered bowel movements are also known as nighttime or first-pass feces. Guinea Pigs usually eat these soft pellets directly from their rear which provide essential proteins, vitamins, and minerals, and replenish normal bacterial flora. Overweight or arthritic guinea pigs often cannot reach their rear in order to eat cecotrophs, which can result in matting/fecal pasting of the fur on their hindquarters. A physical exam is recommended in any guinea pig with hygiene issues.

Dental Disease

A guinea pig's teeth never stop growing, hence the importance of stimulating normal chewing behavior by offering dense fibrous food (hay) and safe, appropriate chews within the habitat. The natural chewing behavior helps contribute to the normal wearing down of teeth. If a guinea pig is exhibiting drooling, spitting out partially chewed food, and/or weight loss, a veterinary appointment should be made.



Spaying and Neutering

Neutering in male guinea pigs (boars) is common and can decrease aggressive behavior tendencies as well as make them infertile, which allows males and females to be housed together responsibly and amicably. Female guinea pigs (sows) can be spayed, but it is a less common practice as it is a riskier procedure and should be done by a veterinarian skilled in guinea pig surgery.

“Hairball” Prevention

Frequent brushing/combing, or use of a “sticky roller” to remove excess fur, can help reduce fur ingestion. Feeding a high fiber diet of mostly timothy hay is always the most important part of promoting GI tract health. In general, bathing guinea pigs is not recommended except for in extreme circumstances. Guinea Pigs are excellent self-groomers and generally do a very good job of keeping themselves clean.

Nail Trims

Guinea Pigs need to have their nails trimmed on a regular basis. Nail trims may be scheduled during routine physical exam appointments but may need to be completed more frequently, varying dependent upon the guinea pig.

Urine

Normal guinea pig urine contains a lot of sediment (mostly calcium), and the color often varies from white to light brown. Under certain circumstances, such as when stressed, sick, or receiving medications, the urine may appear orange or red-tinged (sometimes mistaken for blood) due to a normal pigment. Guinea Pigs can, however, develop urinary tract infections causing blood in the urine. Should this be suspected, a veterinary appointment should be made.

CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS:

- Guinea pigs can sometimes live up to 8+ years with appropriate care!
- Guinea Pigs are generally friendly, social, and active during the daytime when comfortable with their environment. However, they are still prey species, so care should be taken to provide a quiet, calm environment as well as hiding spaces to escape stimuli that incites fear or stress. Effort should be made to acclimatize the guinea pig safely and slowly to a new environment through purposeful “socialization” sessions.



- Guinea pigs do best with another cagemate. Caretakers should be prepared for the added responsibility (and habitat size/cleaning requirements) of multiple guinea pigs for optimal health and socialization.
- Guinea pigs need DAILY care and interaction – it is not appropriate to leave the unattended in a classroom environment over the weekend.
- Guinea pigs should not be housed with rabbits.
- Guinea pigs likely require daily additional stabilized form of Vitamin C supplementation. Do not use water additives due to their instability.
- Guinea pigs that are appropriately socialized and have a caretaker dedicated to proper physical and mental care as well as space and exercise requirements outlined above can make excellent classroom additions. Ideally, an older student classroom setting is best in which responsibilities can be shared and a quiet, safe environment can be cultivated for guinea pigs.

HELPFUL LINKS

How to Litter Train Your Guinea Pig (written for rabbits but still helpful)

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/how-to-litter-train-your-rabbit>

Providing Daily Enrichment

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/five-ways-to-provide-daily-enrichment-for-small-animals>

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/all-about-enrichment-handout>.

Fortified Foods

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/all-about-fortified-foods>

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/quick-tips-on-correctly-offering-fortified-food>

Transitioning Your Pet to a New Diet

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/how-to-transition-your-pets-food>