

Guinea Pig Care



Guinea pigs are docile little chatterboxes that make excellent pets, but like any other animal they need conscientious care and handling.

Companions

Guinea pigs are sociable rodents, and prefer to live in pairs or small groups. We recommend that you **always get at least two**, so that they can keep each other company. Any gender pairing works, as long as their personalities are compatible; if you have a male and female together, it is essential that one or both of them is **neutered** to prevent unwanted pregnancies. It is easier to start with two babies, but you can gradually introduce adults in most cases.



Housing

Always buy the largest cage that you can afford and accommodate. Guinea pigs need an *absolute* minimum of 120cm x 60cm floor space each. Double-storeyed hutches are an option, but bear in mind that guinea pigs are not naturally a climbing species and can sometimes struggle with steep or narrow ramps, so it is best to keep to one level if you can.

Indoor or outdoor housing is fine, but if you keep your guinea pigs outside make sure they can be brought into a warm, dry shed during the colder months. Always make sure their house is free of drafts.

Shavings, shredded paper or hay are all fine as bedding, but whatever you choose make sure it is completely replaced weekly and remove any heavily soiled areas daily. Build-up of ammonia in soiled bedding can be extremely harmful to lungs.

Guinea pigs enjoy hiding during play, so provide hiding places such as large cardboard tubes or drainpipes, flower pots, or purpose-built guinea pig caves/houses. They may also appreciate toys – plastic cat balls with bells are a good example.

Diet

A good diet is very important for guinea pigs, to keep their teeth healthy (see 'dental health' section below) and to ensure they get all the nutrients they need.

Feed a small amount (1-2 tablespoons max) of **good quality guinea pig pellets** daily. Avoid the colourful 'muesli' type foods, because these encourage selective feeding. Do NOT feed guinea pigs rabbit food – it can result in a vitamin C deficiency.

Unlike dogs, cats and rabbits, guinea pigs' bodies cannot make vitamin C; therefore they need a supply of **vitamin C** in their diet to avoid problems such as scurvy. A commercial guinea pig diet should contain all the vitamin C they need, but you can supplement it if necessary (particularly important if they are unwell or during periods of stress). Boots sell 200mg vitamin C tablets – a quarter of a tablet in the food is suitable. Alternatively you can put a 1000mg dissolvable tablet in the drinking water.



The most important part of any guinea pig's diet is roughage. The majority of their diet should consist of grass and/or fresh **Timothy hay**, which should be fed ad lib, 24/7.

Plenty of roughage is crucial to maintain dental and digestive health.

Guinea pigs enjoy a daily ration of green, leafy vegetables such as parsley and spinach, dandelion leaves, peppers and a small amount of tomato. Root vegetables such as carrots, and fruits such as apple, strawberries or melon are fine as a treat – but don't feed them more than a few times a week because they contain a high sugar content that can upset digestive health or lead to obesity.

Always make sure your guinea pigs have access to **fresh drinking water** via a bowl or bottle.

Dental health

Guinea pigs have four incisor teeth visible at the front of their mouth. They also have sixteen 'cheek teeth' at the back of their mouths, which are used for grinding down food. All of them **grow continuously**, so if they are not properly worn down they can easily become overgrown. This has a number of potentially serious consequences for the guinea pig.

1. Overgrown cheek teeth can form sharp points, which dig into the cheeks and tongue causing painful ulceration and inappetence. Sometimes they can even trap the tongue, which means the guinea pig cannot eat.
2. The roots of the upper cheek teeth are very close to the eye, so overgrown teeth can lead to eye infections and tear flow problems.
3. The roots of the bottom cheek teeth, if overgrown, will break through the bottom of the jawbone and become infected, leading to abscesses in the face.



The most common reason for teeth to become overgrown is **inappropriate diet**, namely not enough roughage to wear the teeth down. Always provide as much hay and/or grass as your guinea pigs can eat to aid dental health. Fruity chews and wooden blocks make good treats and toys but will not contribute to wearing down the teeth.

Exercise

Guinea pigs can become obese and bored if they are provided with insufficient exercise. They should be allowed to spend time outdoors in a run (or free range if your garden is secure), or allowed time to exercise around the house. Make sure you take measures to protect your guinea pigs from harming themselves indoors – supervise them at all times and make sure they have no access to electrical wires, which they can chew.

Preventative care

There are currently no vaccines available for guinea pigs. They can be susceptible to external parasites, such as mites and lice; spot-ons specific to guinea pigs are available so speak to your vet if you are concerned. Please do not use dog or cat treatments on your guinea pigs as this is likely to harm them.

Check your guinea pigs over daily; examine their ears and nose for any signs of discharge, make sure their bottoms are clean and check their feet and coat for any signs of soreness. If you notice anything unusual, or your guinea pigs seem unwell, seek veterinary advice. A guinea pig not eating or passing any faeces is an emergency, so don't delay.

More information about guinea pigs is available at the Guinea Lynx website:
www.guinealynx.info

