

CARING FOR GUINEA PIGS



History

Guinea Pigs (otherwise known as 'Cavies') are small rodents indigenous to South America where several different species may still be found. They are grazing animals that live in extended family groups in their natural habitat

General

Before you decide to obtain a guinea pig, remember it will rely on you for its every need and will require daily care and attention 365 days of the year, regardless of any other plans you have. Average life span is 4 to 7 years.

Choosing Your Pet

Guinea Pigs come in a number of varieties and colours, but those with the short, smooth coat are easiest to care for. The longhaired varieties require regular grooming.

Male Or Female?

One guinea pig on its own is unlikely to thrive, but do not attempt to introduce two adult guinea pigs of the same sex as fighting will almost certainly break out. It is best to select two young littermates of the same sex, or a father and son or mother and daughter.

Handling

Guinea Pigs enjoy gentle handling and petting, but are inclined to be timid. It is important not to over-handle them, as they are susceptible to stress. They are animals that need plenty of rest. The best way to pick up a guinea pig is to put one hand around its shoulders and under the chest, whilst the other hand supports the hindquarters. Serious injury may be caused if guinea pig wriggles free and falls or jumps from your arms.

Housing

A good roomy hutch, not less than 4ft x 2ft x 18in will house two small guinea pigs. One third of the hutch should be enclosed for cosy, draught-free sleeping quarters. The other two-thirds is for daytime and should have a strong wire-mesh front to admit light and air. Each compartment should have a separate door, well fitting with good hinges and catches to facilitate easy cleaning. The roof should be sloping and covered with roofing felt, tiles etc, for good weatherproofing and should overhang the hutch to keep its sides dry and to prevent driving rain from saturating the interior. The hutch should be on raised legs to give protection from predators and should be in a well ventilated, but not draughty position, out of strong sunlight. Facing the morning sun is best.

Bedding

A warm, dry, comfortable bed is of the utmost importance to animals that have to spend a good deal of their time in a hutch. Bedding should be divided into two parts: a lining material to absorb urine and an overlay of straw or shredded paper to provide warmth, insulation and an opportunity for burrowing. Peat, cat litter, woodchips or shavings of natural wood fibre make a good absorbent lining for the bedding, but avoid woodchips that may have a high content of volatile oils or preservatives as these can be poisonous. Also avoid artificial fibre bedding which can cause severe digestive problems or even death. The floor of the day compartment needs a layer of litter spread on top of newspapers that will absorb the urine.

Exercise

A ramp or steps leading from the daytime compartment of the hutch to the ground of a strongly fenced enclosure will provide a more natural environment for your pets. Inside the enclosure there should be some hollow logs and pipes, shrubbery or rocky caves to provide cover and protection. Alternatively, a portable ark or exercise pen is desirable so that the animals can have access to grass and an opportunity for exercise. Ensure part of the pen is covered to provide shelter from sudden rain or strong sun. The pen should be moved to a fresh grassy spot daily. In bad weather your pets may be exercised in an indoor pen. This can be a large shallow sided wooden tray, filled with straw, in which the guinea pig can run about and burrow. You will need to cover the base of the tray with newspapers and a spread of lining material like peat, cat litter or wood-shavings on top before you add the straw. Water must be available.

If you allow your guinea pigs some freedom inside your house they will need constant supervision as they have a tendency to chew things – including electrical cords and cables.

Feeding

Guinea Pigs need a diet high in Vitamin C and consisting almost entirely of vegetable matter. Variety is essential and the food offered must be fresh and free of contamination. Special pellets are available from pet shops and form a good base for the diet, which must include greenstuff, raw fruit and vegetables – and good quality hay. Keep this in a rack to avoid soiling. Greenstuff must be carefully washed to ensure pesticides do not contaminate it. Carrots and beans sliced with a potato peeler are much enjoyed, as are carrot tops, celery, cabbage, and silver beet. Fresh water should be supplied daily via a drip feed bottle and replenished daily. Use heavy earthenware containers for food to prevent spillage. Avoid sudden changes of diet, which can cause digestive problems. Keep all food containers scrupulously clean.

Gnawing Block

Like all rodents, guineapigs need something hard to chew on and will gnaw their hutch if there is nothing else. A piece of deciduous wood kept in the hutch will provide useful exercise for their teeth and help to keep them in good condition.

Breeding

The gestation period is unusually long for a rodent, being approximately 63 days. The young are born well developed with a full coat, their eyes open and their teeth already cut. They are able to move around and will begin to take food within a few days, although they will also suckle from their mother for their first 2 – 3 weeks.

Guinea Pigs are not bred until 4 – 6 months of age, although breeding as early as 3 months is not detrimental. If the boar is left with the sow permanently, it is possible for her to bear five litters a year. Such an intensive rate of breeding is most undesirable. Finding good homes for the offspring can be a major problem. We strongly recommend that you do not breed from your pet guinea pigs.

De-sexing

Guinea Pigs may be spayed or neutered to prevent unwanted litters. It is also a means of controlling fighting amongst males.

Health Care

Guinea Pigs should have an alert, active appearance. Their coat should be sleek and their gait smooth with no signs of lameness. Their droppings should be dry and firm, their eyes bright and clear, and their teeth clean and not overlong.

Vaccinations and worming are not usually required, but a high standard of cleanliness and care is necessary to ensure your pets' good health.

A deficiency of Vitamin C can cause loss of weight, swollen joints, difficulty walking, generalised weakness and excessive salivation shown by a wet chin.

Overgrown teeth occur when your guinea pig has not been fed enough hard food or a gnawing block has not been provided in the hutch.

Skin ailments can occur if the hutch is not cleaned out properly and soiled bedding has not been removed. They can also be caused by lice, which are a very common problem.

Diarrhoea may be due to an infection from contaminated food or a sudden change in diet. Withhold greens for 24 hours, feeding only hay and water. If diarrhoea continues, consult your veterinary surgeon.