

About Guinea Pigs

By Debby Widolf

Guinea pigs are among the sweetest of companion animals and are loved around the world. These pint-sized little rodents originated in South America. Also called “cavies,” guinea pigs have an average life span of five to seven years and there are over 40 varieties. The following information will provide general guidelines for helping your guinea pig live a long and healthy life.



One Guinea Pig, Two Guinea Pigs?

As herd animals, guinea pigs are very social, so it makes sense to adopt two or to get your guinea pig a friend if you only have one. Compatibility of guinea pigs depends on individual personalities and not gender, size or breed. The easiest match is two babies or a baby with an adult.

Like most guinea pig rescue groups, Best Friends doesn't spay the female guinea pigs, since spaying them is a delicate operation and is often very hard on them. We do neuter the males, however, so we can adopt out male and female pairs, as well as same-sex pairs that get along.

Introducing guinea pigs should be done in a neutral space. Watch closely for fighting and separate them if necessary. If they seem comfortable with each other, place them in a newly cleaned cage or space with more than one “hidey” house, basket or tunnel and food dishes. Continue to watch them closely for several days to make sure they're compatible.

Housing

There are several good options for housing your guinea pigs, but don't select housing with wire flooring because it can hurt their feet. When it comes to guinea pig housing, the bigger the better. The minimum size recommended is seven square feet for one guinea pig and an additional two to four square feet for each additional pig.

A small house inside the pen or cage will provide a sense of security. You can buy small “pigloos” at pet supply stores, but cardboard boxes, clay pots and baskets turned upside down, with an entrance created, also make good houses.

If you do not have other pets and a covered cage is not necessary, an open-topped enclosure or pen will make a fun home and allow you more interaction with the guinea pigs. Don't ever leave your guinea pigs alone with a predatory animal, such as a dog, cat or ferret.

Place the cavies' enclosure in an area that's free from drafts, and keep them out of direct sunlight and away from cold temperatures. The ideal temperature range for guinea pigs is 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit (18 to 24 degrees Centigrade).

Bedding

Many types of bedding are available for your guinea pigs' home. Some good ones are Carefresh, Yesterday's News, aspen or kiln-dried pine shavings. You can also use towels or blankets. All bedding will need to be changed every few days to keep down odors. To make cleanup easier, the floor of the enclosure can be covered with newspaper before the bedding is added. Just roll it all up, wipe or spray with a solution of white vinegar and water, let it dry, and you are done!

You can give your guinea pig a litter box topped off with fresh hay; any hay that is wet must be removed daily. Don't use raw pine, cedar shavings or cat litter in your pigs' litter box.

Furnishing Your Guinea Pigs' Home

Guinea pigs will drink from a water bottle or a crock (get one heavy enough that it won't tip over). You will need a non-tipping food bowl, a hay rack and a litter box. Toys that are safe for rabbits and parrots are also good choices for guinea pigs. To make the guinea pigs' environment more interesting and fun for the covies, add Pigloos, baskets, clay pots, and plastic or cardboard tunnels. Untreated wood and pine tree branches make good chew toys. Don't get your guinea pig an exercise ball (the type made for hamsters), however, since the balls can injure their backs.

Diet

Feed your guinea pigs plain, dye-free, high-quality guinea pig pellets formulated with Vitamin C. Don't feed rabbit pellets to guinea pigs; they do not contain vitamin C. Avoid mixes containing treats, nuts and dried fruit because they are too rich for covies. Provide fresh grass or timothy hay daily.

To prevent scurvy, guinea pigs need vitamin C in their diets every day. Ten to 30 mg is the right amount. There are several ways to ensure your guinea pigs get enough C. You can give them one-fourth of a chewable 100 mg vitamin C tablet. Daily amounts of vegetables high in C, about a cup per guinea pig, will do the trick, too. Parsley, romaine or green lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, green or red peppers, spinach and cantaloupe are all good sources of vitamin C. Vegetables such as cabbage, collard greens and broccoli may cause gas, so feed these infrequently.

Provide fresh water daily; avoid distilled and water high in minerals. Don't add vitamin C to the water because your guinea pigs might not like the taste and consequently might not drink all the water they need.

Grooming

Long-haired guinea pigs need daily brushing with a soft brush or fine-toothed comb; short-haired covies can be groomed less frequently. Brushing loosens dirt, picks up hair and decreases shedding. Nails can be trimmed with small-animal nail-trimming scissors. To avoid cutting into the "quick" of the nail, get a small penlight and shine it through the nail to help you see the quick. Keep the product Quikstop handy in case you do cut the quick.

Guinea pigs generally don't require bathing, but if they do, use a mild shampoo such as Bunny Bath by Four Paws. Spot-bathe your guinea pig and dry thoroughly to prevent chills. Also, avoid getting water in their ears.

Veterinary Care

A veterinarian who treats guinea pigs is called an "exotics" vet. Weight loss can be a symptom of illness, so keep track of your guinea pigs' weight. Please take your guinea pigs to the veterinarian promptly if they refuse to eat or drink, have respiratory symptoms such as wheezing or difficulty breathing, have diarrhea or blood in the urine, have loss of balance, or are itching excessively. Since cavyies are good at hiding the symptoms of illness, get to know what is normal for your guinea pigs. They can become critically ill quickly, and prompt treatment can save their lives.

Socializing

Guinea pigs can be loving and cuddly pets, but they can be seriously injured if dropped and may bite if mishandled. They aren't really appropriate pets for children under age six. Small children should not be allowed to pick up a guinea pig without supervision. Always support the guinea pig's body with both hands while picking up and holding one of them. Have a towel on your lap in case of an "accident."

When you first get your guinea pigs, give them a couple of days to get used to their new home before you handle them. Speak quietly and bribe them with a tasty vegetable to come close. Be patient and you will soon have a new friend. Have a wonderful time getting to know and sharing your life with the endearing guinea pig!

Debby Widolf is the coordinator of development and advocacy for the Best Friends Bunny House.

See also: Caring for Your Guinea Pig