

# Caring for Your Guinea Pig

By Mark Burgess, DVM

Guinea pigs, also called cavies, can be sociable and enjoyable pets. They often live to be five or six years old. If you're thinking about getting a guinea pig, please adopt your cavy from a rescue group rather than buying from a pet store or breeder. There are many wonderful guinea pigs out there just waiting to be adopted. To find a cavy rescue, do a search for "guinea pig rescue" on the Internet. Or, check out the "small and furry" category on [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com).



## Housing

Guinea pigs need a dry, draft-free environment. Temperatures of 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit are tolerable for them, with 70 degrees being ideal. They may be housed in wood or wire cages with solid floors. Avoid wire floors, since their feet may become caught and bones broken as the pet tries to free himself. Wire floors also tend to cause sores on the feet. Provide a thick layer of good bedding, such as recycled paper, hardwood shavings (not cedar or pine), or straw. Cavies may be housed in groups or singly. To prevent fighting, mature males should not be housed together.

## Social Needs

Cavies can be quite sociable if you interact with them regularly. Ideally, they should have time out of the cage every day to exercise. Ink-free cardboard toys, such as toilet-paper rolls, make good chew toys; small cardboard boxes make good hiding spots. Avoid giving your guinea pig hard wood or metal objects as chew toys, since these may damage cavy teeth. Female (or neutered male) cavies may be sociable with each other; solitary cavies should have regular human interaction to prevent boredom and antisocial behavior.

## Feeding

The bulk of a cavy's diet should be guinea pig pellets (not a seed and fruit mix), and grass hay such as timothy (avoid alfalfa hay). Pellets may be fed free-choice, unless obesity occurs; hay is always fed free-choice. Pellets provide balanced nutrition; hay provides roughage essential for intestinal health in cavies.

Guinea pigs also need Vitamin C in their diet every day. You can't rely on pelleted food to supply Vitamin C because this vitamin deteriorates rapidly with exposure to heat, light and air. Good sources include parsley, apples or citrus fruit, additives designed for drinking water (must be added daily), or chewable Vitamin C tablets.

One or two small apple slices or a handful of fresh parsley fed daily provide some Vitamin C, but may still fall short of a cavy's total needs, especially if she is ill or stressed.

The daily Vitamin C requirement is 10 mg per day; cavies who are sick may need 30 mg daily. The best source is probably giving a chewable Vitamin C tablet daily. To feed your guinea pig tablets, break off a piece roughly equivalent to the desired dose; giving more than necessary isn't a problem unless the dose is extreme.

In general, fresh green, leafy veggies and a little fruit may be offered daily, but should be limited to less than 20 percent of the diet. Items high in sugars (such as fruit, baby carrots, tomatoes, and corn) or high in protein (such as seeds, oats, and alfalfa) should be especially limited since they can easily cause bloat or diarrhea, which can be deadly. Avoid broccoli, cabbage, potatoes and onions, since these may also upset the cavy's intestinal system.

Fresh water, of course, should always be available. Ball-bearing bottles are cleaner and not as easily spilled as bowls. Remember to clean your guinea pig's cage, food bowls and water sources regularly.

## Common Diseases

**Vitamin C deficiency (scurvy).** This is a common and preventable disease in guinea pigs. Signs of scurvy include drooling, weight loss, hair loss or reluctance to move because of painful joints. The treatment is mainly Vitamin C supplementation. The cavy's diet should be corrected to include daily Vitamin C sources. If a guinea pig becomes very ill, supportive care (fluids, antibiotics, etc.) may be needed.

**Dental diseases.** Guinea pigs have teeth that grow constantly, so they may develop overgrown front teeth (incisors) or back teeth (molars) for a variety of reasons. Incisor overgrowth may be visible as long tusk-like projections from the mouth. Molar overgrowth (or molar infections) may cause drooling, chin staining, a foul odor, and difficulty eating.

Treatment of tooth problems often involves trimming the overgrown teeth back to normal length, extracting infected teeth, correcting any other illness that may be contributing to the problem, and force-feeding if the cavy cannot eat. Many cases are curable, but some dental problems can be persistent and life-threatening. Fasting guinea pigs need immediate care, since they can die from bowel upsets if they have inadequate roughage intake.

**Coccidia.** Coccidia, microscopic parasites living in the bowel, are mostly seen in young cavies. If you notice diarrhea (especially in a young pet), a fecal analysis should be performed by your veterinarian. The treatment is giving sulfa drugs and cleaning up feces to prevent re-infection.

**Bowel upsets.** Intestinal upsets are a major cause of death in pet cavies. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, diarrhea, and lethargy, but some cavies only show one of these signs. Cavies have sensitive intestines, and almost any stress can cause this disease. Sudden diet changes, sugary treats, parasites, and some antibiotics (especially penicillins) can cause a sudden and often fatal diarrhea or bloat. This is probably due to an upset of the normal intestinal bacteria.

To prevent bowel upsets, you should feed your guinea pig a high-roughage diet with minimal use of sweet items such as fruit. You should also minimize high-protein foods such as oats, seeds, nuts, and alfalfa. Avoid sudden changes in diet, and avoid veggies in the cabbage family. Treatment of bowel upsets varies with the severity, but it may include bacterial supplements such as milk-free acidophilus, increased roughage, intestinal stimulants, anti-diarrheals, and, in severe cases, IV fluids with therapy for shock. Prompt medical care is essential whenever a cavy is lethargic, is not eating, has diarrhea, or feels cold to the touch. Many cases of bowel upset are curable if caught in time.

**Lice and mites.** These are common skin parasites. The microscopic mites burrow deep into the skin and, when numerous, cause intense itching, flaking, and hair loss. In severe cases, the cavy may develop large scabs or sores due to intense scratching and biting. Lice are larger than mites, barely visible to the naked eye, and live on the surface, causing mild itching and some hair loss when numerous.

Both mites and lice may be present for months or years with minimal signs until their numbers are large. Lice are easily killed with topical products such as bird mite and lice spray, kitten flea powder, or lyme sulfur dip. You'll need to treat lice weekly for 6-8 weeks, since the eggs persist for long periods. Mites are harder to kill, but respond to treatment with ivermectin (oral or injectable) weekly for 6-8 weeks. Lyme sulfur dip also works when applied weekly for 6-8 weeks, but it is more labor-intensive and must be applied thoroughly to be fully effective. Severe cases of mange (mites) may warrant use of ivermectin plus lyme dip for a few weeks, followed by ivermectin alone for the remaining weeks of therapy.

Cleaning the cage weekly when treating the mites or lice will help reduce re-infestation, but long-term environmental treatment is unnecessary, since the parasites die if they are off their host for long. These parasites are species-specific, but highly contagious between cavies; use caution when introducing new cavies to an existing group.

**Respiratory infection.** Signs include sneezing, wheezing, lethargy, nasal or eye discharge, or difficulty breathing. Various bacteria may cause this, including Strep and Bordetella. Dogs, cats and rabbits may carry Bordetella and ideally should not be housed in contact with cavies. Cavies at risk of exposure may be vaccinated twice yearly for Bordetella to prevent infection. The vaccine must be a killed product, as live vaccines may cause illness in cavies.

**Head tilt (wry neck, torticollis).** This is usually due to internal ear infection, sometimes secondary to a respiratory infection. The cavy usually tilts her head to one side and has a loss of balance, often falling when trying to walk. Strep bacteria are a common cause. Treatment is with antibiotics.

**Foot infections (bumblefoot).** These infections, which can be life-threatening, are usually caused by improper housing, such as wire floors or soiled bedding. Diarrhea or urinary incontinence may increase soiling and the risk of foot problems. Obesity puts more pressure on the feet and may contribute to abrasion of the foot pads. Guinea pigs with a mild case have superficial ulcers on the bottoms of one or more feet; a scab may cover the ulcer. A severe case, characterized by deep swelling and infection of the feet, can be very difficult to cure, requiring multiple surgeries and long-term antibiotics. Prevention is

easier than treatment, so make sure your cavy has a clean, dry cage with a solid floor and plenty of straw or paper bedding to pad the floor and absorb urine.

### **Veterinary Care**

Regular exams are recommended for early disease detection. Have an exam done when you first get your cavy, then annually thereafter. Guinea pigs over four years old may benefit from exams every six months. Vaccination for Bordetella may be given every six months if your vet determines that the cavy is at risk of exposure. With good care, your guinea pig can be a happy and lovable pet!

*Dr. Mark Burgess is owner of Southwest Animal Hospital/The Exotic Animal Practice in Beaverton, Oregon. Ninety-five percent of his practice is small exotic pets, including ferrets, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, hedgehogs, marsupials, and some wildlife. He lectures at conferences and has published articles on exotic pet disease in medical journals.*