

# Caring for Your Potbellied Pig

Potbellied pigs aren't difficult to care for, but they do need regular grooming, occasional ear and eye cleaning, dental care and hoof care.

**Grooming.** Well-socialized pigs love to be touched, given belly rubs and groomed. Grooming is an opportunity for positive interaction with your pig. Pigs have bristles instead of fur, but that doesn't mean that they don't benefit from regular brushings. Potbellied pigs are typically native to humid, tropical environments, so their coat is not as thick as fur. The brushing helps remove loose hair, helps exfoliate dry, flaky skin and improves circulation. Surprisingly, many pigs do shed; in fact, once a year most will shed all their bristles over the course of several weeks. It's a normal process and their coats grow back.



**Ear and Eye Cleaning.** Pigs' eyes will tear up sometimes and get a buildup of a mixture of dirt and tears. If a pig is well-socialized, you will be able to wipe that gunk away with a towel or your fingers. Pigs' ears can get a waxy buildup, which can be wiped out with a soft, damp towel or piece of gauze. Don't use a cotton swab for this purpose because you might injure the pig's ear. Do not "dig" around in the ear or try to remove all the wax, since some wax is necessary, to protect the inner ear from debris and water. Routine cleaning of a pig's eyes and ears will prevent further problems and make the pig more comfortable.

**Dental Care.** Pigs can get cavities and tartar, and they can break a tooth occasionally. Unless your pig is extremely comfortable with you poking around in her mouth, it's best to let your veterinarian examine the pig's mouth when the pig is sedated at the vet's office. Don't feed your pig processed foods or too many natural foods with a high sugar content, such as fruit, because they can get cavities from these foods. Fruit should be given as treats, not meals!

In male pigs, their tusks grow continuously, so the tusks will need to be trimmed. Trimming is best done by a veterinarian who is educated and experienced with potbellied pigs, and who can do the work while the pig is sedated. In the wild, the males use their tusks as weapons, so it is beneficial to pig and human alike to keep the tusks trimmed (unless the pig is not at all aggressive). Females have tusks, too, but they don't continue to grow as the males' tusks do.

**Hoof Care.** Potbellied pigs also need to have their hooves trimmed. Active pigs will require less hoof trimming than those who are not so physically active. It is possible to desensitize a pig to having his hooves trimmed.

Here's how to do it: If the pig is receptive to belly rubs, rub his legs and feet while you are rubbing his belly. Desensitizing a pig to anything will require time and patience, so go slow. Once the pig is comfortable with having his feet touched, try using a farrier nipper to nip off the outermost edge of the hoof. (A farrier nipper is a tool used by farriers to trim hooves.) Nip a little bit at a time, always erring on the side of caution so you don't cut too much and cause the pig pain.

After trimming the hoof, file the edge smooth with a metal file or a dremel tool. If using the dremel tool, you will need to desensitize the pig to the sound and feel of the tool. You can do this by running the tool and allowing the pig to become accustomed to the noise, however long it takes. Once your pig seems comfortable with the sound, touch the hoof briefly with the dremel and watch how he reacts. If he does okay, lengthen the time gradually as the pig becomes used to the tool.

Also, a veterinarian who is experienced with potbellied pigs can tend to the hooves while the pig is sedated. At Best Friends, the veterinarian does hoof and tusk trimming, ear cleaning and blood draws in one sedated visit.

It is always a good idea to periodically examine the pig's feet while you're grooming or giving a belly rub. In some pigs, the pads of the feet can separate from the hoof wall or become infected. It's important to catch these problems early to prevent them from getting worse.

**Fun for Pigs.** As part of their daily care, pigs need both physical and mental stimulation. Treat balls intended for dogs can be used for pigs. The idea with treat balls is to create a puzzle for the critter to figure out: how to get the treats out of the ball. Instead of kibble, use potbellied pig pellets, unsalted almonds or small pieces of dehydrated veggies.

Another way to provide enrichment is to toss pellets, unsalted popcorn and unsalted almonds around the pig's enclosure several times a day. Try doing this after the pig finishes breakfast and dinner, as well as once in the middle of the day, as a lunchtime snack. The activity of looking for the treats provides the pig with both physical and mental exercise. And it helps to satisfy pigs' innate desire to root around. Beware, though: They will root in any area they have access to, including your lawn, so if you want to preserve that expanse of green, keep your pig away from it.

Finally, be sure to socialize with your pig every day, as this is enrichment, too – for both of you!

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