

CARE OF PET GUINEA PIGS

Connie Orcutt, DVM

Guinea pigs are lively, lovable pets that are relatively easy to care for. They are ideal for small children because they are usually sweet-tempered, a manageable size, easy to catch if they get out of small hands, and relatively long-lived compared to many other small mammals. The most common types of guinea pigs are the English or American Shorthair, the Peruvian (long-haired), and the Abyssinian (swirled hair). The average weight of a guinea pig ranges from 500-900 grams (1-2 pounds). The average lifespan of a guinea pig is 5 to 7 years.

ENVIRONMENT

The cage you choose should be large enough for your guinea pig to move around comfortably and still accommodate a hide box. The sides of the cage do not need to be especially tall, since guinea pigs do not jump very high. Any cage should provide adequate ventilation; for this reason, aquarium tanks are not recommended for guinea pigs. Flooring should be solid, not wire, to protect your pig's feet. Avoid wood flooring which allows urine to soak in and is difficult to clean. A commercially available cage with a plastic bottom and a removable wire top is a good choice. Avoid wood chips when choosing bedding, because they can contain harmful oils. A safer alternative is recycled paper bedding. Any bedding should be changed frequently. Your guinea pig should be allowed to run freely in the house, with supervision, on a daily basis for exercise. If not, he may need to be housed in a substantially larger cage. Make sure any wires or other chewable items are out of your pig's reach.

Guinea pigs are very social animals and are usually content around other guinea pigs, although this may mean they will be less bonded to their human family. Pigs of the same sex usually get along best given appropriate cage space. Males and females can be housed together if at least one of them has been neutered to prevent pregnancy.

DIET

Your guinea pig's diet should consist of pellets, soft pieces of timothy hay or another grass hay (available at all times), and fresh vegetables. Alfalfa hay may be substituted if you cannot find grass hay, but it should be avoided if possible due to its high calcium content which may predispose to formation of urinary stones in guinea pigs. Sharp pieces of hay should be avoided, because they can cause sores in your pet's mouth which may become infected. Use only plain pellets, not the kind with nuts or dried fruits which are too high in fat for your guinea pig.

Guinea pigs are unable to make vitamin C, so they need to be given a vitamin C supplement to avoid serious health problems. Many pellets made for guinea pig are produced

with vitamin C supplements, but the vitamin degrades quickly on the shelf and becomes ineffective. Your pig should be given 60 mg of vitamin C daily which can be provided in several ways. Liquid vitamin C supplements are available at pharmacies and health food stores. Be sure when choosing a vitamin that it contains only vitamin C, because over-supplementation of other vitamins can cause serious health problems in your guinea pig. It is best to give the vitamin C supplement to your pig directly instead of putting it in the water source where it is rapidly degraded.

An even better way to supplement your pig's diet is by feeding fresh foods high in vitamin C instead. ****See our Vitamin C Handout****

Guinea pigs drink a lot, so make sure your pet has plenty of fresh water daily. Water is best provided in a hanging sipper water bottle, because bowls of water are easily soiled. The bottle should be checked frequently to make sure the ball valve is working properly. Lack of water can rapidly cause dehydration and kidney problems in your guinea pig.

MEDICAL PROBLEMS

Loss of appetite/anorexia: This is a nonspecific sign that can be a part of many diseases. Whatever the underlying cause, lack of eating for even two or three days can cause irreversible damage to your guinea pig's liver. Call your veterinarian as soon as you notice a decreased appetite. You may need to help your pig through this period by feeding him soft foods such as Critical Care with a dropper or syringe.

Vitamin C deficiency ("scurvy"): Vitamin C deficiency can affect your guinea pig in many ways. Some of the signs you may notice include loss of appetite, lethargy, poor hair coat, weight loss, nasal discharge, reluctance to move, a stiff gait, painful joints, bruising, and an increased susceptibility to infections. This problem is usually reversible with vitamin C supplementation.

Dental: Your guinea pig's teeth grow continuously. Normal teeth are usually kept at an appropriate length by action of the teeth against each other. However, any of the teeth can grow too long. In severe cases, molars may actually grow across the tongue or create ulcers which make eating difficult or painful. Signs of dental problems include an interest in food but inability to eat, excessive salivation, sour breath, or pawing at the mouth. Contact your veterinarian as soon as you notice these signs, because anorexia even for a short time can cause serious problems. Overgrown teeth can be trimmed by a veterinarian experienced in working with guinea pigs.

Nasal Discharge: Respiratory problems can be common in guinea pigs. You may also notice reddening of or discharge from the eyes, lethargy, anorexia, or difficulty breathing. The most common cause of nasal discharge is bacterial infection, but vitamin C deficiency, overgrown teeth, or other problems may be involved. Notify your veterinarian if you see these signs so your pig can be examined. Antibiotic treatment may be necessary, but never start giving any drugs on your own. Some antibiotics can be fatal to guinea pigs, so rely on a veterinarian experienced in working with guinea pigs to prescribe them.

Reproductive: Female guinea pigs should not be bred until they weigh at least 500 grams or are 4-5 months old. Older females (7 months of age or more) should not be bred for the first time, because the bones of the pelvis may have fused making it very difficult or impossible to give birth naturally. In these cases, the female will be depressed or even collapsed and may have a vaginal discharge. This is an emergency situation that will probably require a cesarean section. For this reason, older females should never be housed with males that have not been neutered. Female guinea pigs reach puberty, and can become pregnant, at 5 to 8 weeks of age; males become sexually mature at 10-19 weeks of age.

Urinary Tract: Bladder infections or stones can occur in your guinea pig. Signs include blood in the urine, straining or crying when urinating, weight loss, lethargy, or lack of appetite. An x-ray and urine collection by your veterinarian may be necessary to diagnose this problem. Bladder infections require antibiotic treatment, while stones in the bladder or elsewhere in the urinary tract usually require surgery. Although the cause of urinary stone formation in guinea pigs is not fully known, high levels of calcium in the diet may be involved.

Sore feet: Wire flooring can cause your guinea pig's feet to become red, swollen, and painful. It is important to provide a flat surface where your pig can rest. A soft padded area may be necessary if the feet become sore. Your guinea pig should be examined at the first sign of sore feet, because infections can spread to involve deeper tissues or even joints.

Guinea pigs do not have to be vaccinated against any diseases.

Knowledge of your guinea pig's needs will help avoid problems before they arise. Good luck, and enjoy your guinea pig!!