



## Tips for you and your guinea pig

Guinea pigs are rodents, closely related to chinchillas and porcupines. Originally, guinea pigs were found in the Andes Mountains of South America. They are now bred for pets, research and food all over the world. Their popularity as pets has increased due to their availability and even temperament. Guinea pigs are very social animals who live in large groups in the wild. Herbivorous by nature, they eat only fruits and vegetables. In the wild, guinea pigs forage for grasses, roots, fruits and seeds during the afternoon and evening. There are eleven varieties of guinea pigs. The three varieties of guinea pigs most frequently offered for sale are: English or short-haired, the Abyssinian (short rough coat arranged in whorls), and the Peruvian or long-haired. Guinea pigs may be mono-colored, bicolored or tricolored. Young guinea pigs are born with their eyes open and have a full hair coat. They move about immediately and even begin to nibble on solid food.

**Nutrition:** Guinea pigs are unable to manufacture vitamin C within their bodies. Commercial guinea pig chows contain vitamin C; however, even if they are properly stored, half of the vitamin C is lost within six weeks of manufacture. We recommend supplementing your pet's diet with 200 mgs of vitamin C per one quart of water. This solution should be made up daily, because vitamin C breaks down readily. Tang breakfast drink or orange juice can be added to the water to make it more palatable. Your guinea pig should have pellets available at all times. Fresh greens, alfalfa hay, and small amounts of fruits and vegetables can be offered daily. Vegetable matter should not exceed 10-15% of the total diet. All vegetables and fruits should be washed prior to feeding, to remove pesticides and bacteria.

Guinea pigs do not tolerate changes in food or water. Any new taste, odor, or texture may cause your pet to stop eating. Make all dietary changes gradually.

Rabbit pellets do **NOT** contain vitamin C, and are not an acceptable substitute for guinea pig pellets. Guinea pig chow should be purchased in small quantities and stored in the freezer. This will help prolong its shelf-life and prevent the breakdown of vitamin C.

**The Cage:** Your cage can be made of stainless steel, plastic or glass. We do not recommend the use of wire cages; they can cause foot-pad infections and fractures if a leg should get caught.

Guinea pigs need approximately 100 square inches of floor space per animal. The top of the enclosure can be left open if the sides are 7-8 inches high. Male guinea pigs require sides 10 inches in height. Your guinea pig should be provided with an area to hide in or escape to. A "hide box" provides a safe escape alternative to a pet who is frightened. Injuries can result if your pet tries to escape a perceived danger, but has nowhere to hide.

**Substrate:** Materials that are clean, non-toxic, dust free, and absorbent may be used for bedding. We recommend the use of shredded butcher's wrap or newspaper. Sawdust and shavings fit most of the criteria, except that they can collect in the external genitalia, causing impaction or infection. Frequent (every 2-3 days) cleaning and, changing of the bedding is an important husbandry practice.

**Food and Water Dishes:** Ceramic food dishes are not as easily tipped as other types of dishes, and therefore lessen the chance of contamination from urine and feces. We recommend the use of a water bottle and sipper tube rather than a water dish. The bottle and tube will need to be cleaned daily, as guinea pigs tend to foul their water with food. Make sure the water bottle is not plugged or leaking.

**Antibiotics:** NEVER give antibiotics to your guinea pig unless they have been prescribed by a veterinarian. Guinea pigs are very sensitive to antibiotics, and if they are improperly used they can kill your pet. We recommend the use of plain yogurt (1/2 tsp. orally twice a day) while your Guinea pig is undergoing antibiotic therapy. Yogurt helps to replace the "good" bacteria in the digestive tract that are killed by antibiotic use.

## **Common Problems**

### **Vitamin C Deficiency:**

- Signs - Loss of appetite; swollen, painful joints; Reluctance to move; bleeding of the gums.
- What to do - Call your veterinarian

### **Malocclusion:**

- Signs - Premolar teeth fail to meet properly. The tongue is entrapped by the teeth, interested in food but can't eat, or eats only soft food. Weight loss, drooling.
- What to do - Discuss options with your veterinarian.

### **Heat Stroke:**

- Causes - Overweight animals, heavily furred animals, environmental temperature over 85 F, humidity above 70%, inadequate shade or ventilation: animal crowding, stress.
- Signs - Panting, slobbering, weakness, refusal to move, delirium, convulsions.
- What to do - Bathe your pet in cool water and call your veterinarian.

### **Signs of Illness:**

- Lumps and swelling
- Decreased appetite
- Labored or rapid breathing
- Discharge from eyes or nose
- Lethargy / depression
- Incoordination
- Diarrhea

- Hair loss
- Parasites
- Weight loss

### **Biological Data**

Maximum life span	9 years
Average life span	4-5 years
Sexual maturity	2-4 months
Estrous cycle	15-17 days
Gestation period	59-72 days
Average litter size	3-4
Weaning age	14-28 days

Guinea Pigs, like dogs and cats, benefit from an annual examination by your North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian

*From Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine*