How to Keep Your Guinea Pig Happy, Healthy and Safe

- Provide fresh food and water daily.
- Ensure a daily source of stabilized vitamin C in high quality, freshly milled pellets or as a supplement if recommended by your veterinarian. Guinea pigs need at least 25mg of vitamin C daily to meet their needs
- Remove fresh food that is not eaten within a half hour.
- Take your guinea pig to an exotic animal veterinarian for an annual physical examination and any treatments or tests needed to maintain optimal health.
- If your guinea pig has long hair, comb it daily and keep it clipped and clean.
- Check droppings for evidence of illness: small, dry feces may indicate loss of appetite. Soft feces or diarrhea are also abnormal.
- Proper housing should include:
  - Be set up in a quiet part of the house.
  - Be maintained in an ambient temperature: 55–75°F (13–24°C).
  - Include suitable substrates, such as shredded paper (non-inked), recycled newspaper composite materials or pellets, hardwood chips or shavings and compressed wheat straw. Avoid pine, cedar and corn cob for bedding.
  - Be cleaned with a change of bedding material every few days.
  - Provide supervised outdoor access to sunlight with access to shade to prevent overheating (weather permitting).
  - Include a box or tunnel for hiding and resting.
  - Include items for chewing, such as tree branches (not sprayed with herbicides or insecticides), or toys especially for guinea pigs.
- It is important to prevent guinea pigs from accessing:
  - Electrical cords
  - Dogs, cats, ferrets and young children
  - Pesticides and other toxins
  - Tobacco and cigarette smoke
  - Cedar, pine, or corn cob shavings
  - Toxic houseplants
  - Wire exercise wheels
  - Plastic toys that can be broken apart and consumed
  - Wire flooring in its enclosure
  - Furniture
  - Refined sugars
  - Leaded paint and wood varnish
  - Galvanized metal

Common Disorders of Guinea Pigs

It is recommended that your guinea pig have an annual exam. However, if you notice your guinea pig exhibiting any of these signs or symptoms, please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

- **Dental**
  - Malocclusion
  - Tooth fractures
- **Dermatologic**
  - Alopecia
  - Mite or lice infestation
- **Gastrointestinal**
- **Ocular**
  - Cataracts
  - Corneal
  - Ulcers
- **Reproductive**
  - Ovarian cysts
  - Pregnancy toxemia
  - Dystocia
- **Respiratory**
  - Pneumonia
  - Upper respiratory infection
- **Urinary**
  - Cystitis
  - Urolithiasis
- **Miscellaneous**
  - Heat stroke
  - Vitamin C deficiency

Resources

- **Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians** (AEMV.com)
- **Lafeber Emeraid** (lafeber.com/vet/mammal-medicine)
- **Oxbow Animal Health** (oxbowanimalhealth.com)
- **American Cavy Breeders Association** (acbaonline.com)

Cover image: Vishnevskiy Vasily/Shutterstock.com
Inside image: Rosa Jay/Shutterstock.com

EXOTICS COMPANION CARE SERIES

How to Care for Your

Guinea Pig

ASSOCIATION OF EXOTIC MAMMAL VETERINARIANS

To learn more, visit the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians at **AEMV.com**

AEMV_Trifold_Guinea Pig.indd 1 7/31/20 10:55 AM

ABOUT YOUR GUINEA PIG

The domestic guinea pig (Cavia porcellus), also known as a cavy, was domesticated in South America thousands of years ago. A number of free-ranging ancestors still exist in the wild, most particularly the Montane wild guinea pig, Cavia tschudii.

In the United States and many parts of the world, the guinea pig is kept as a pet. Hobbyists breed purebred guinea pigs for shows. Guinea pigs found in pet stores may be one of these varieties, but are often cross-bred. Currently there are at least 13 breeds recognized by the American Cavy Breeders Association. Guinea pigs come in a wide variety of colors and patterns, including American, Texel, Abyssinian (cover), Peruvian, Silky and Teddy (below). There are two hairless breeds as well.

Guinea pigs are not aggressive, preferring to flee in the face of danger rather than bite or scratch. They are sensitive creatures and can become panicked if startled by abrupt and loud noises.

Guinea pigs are **very active creatures** and enjoy running through tunnels and negotiating mazes.

What to Expect from Your Guinea Pig

Guinea pigs (cavies) are intelligent and generally quiet animals. As a solitary pet, it may bond closely to you, greeting you with chirps, purrs, squeaks or whistles. Guinea pigs do not require as much time as some other pets, but the more time spent with them, the more interactive they will be. They are very active creatures and enjoy running through tunnels and negotiating mazes. They may play with toys, and if you have more than one guinea pig, they will play games of chase with each other. Guinea pigs are social animals and will establish a pecking order, frequently male-dominated. Overcrowding may incite aggression, and noncastrated males may be aggressive towards other males even without the presence of females. Guinea pigs establish their food preferences very early in life and do not adapt well to changes in their diet. Hair barbering (chewing of the fur) may occur in situations of stress and overcrowding.

Is your guinea pig male or female?

To determine the sex of your guinea pig, examine its external genitalia: male guinea pigs have large scrotal sacs, and their penis can be easily extruded with gentle pressure; females have vaginal and urinary orifices. Females are usually smaller than males. It may be more difficult to sex very young animals.

What do guinea pigs do all day?

Guinea pigs like quiet, peaceful environments and appreciate having a box or tunnel in which to hide and rest. Your guinea pig will enjoy supervised exercise outside its cage. Like all rodents, guinea pigs explore their world through nibbling on new items; therefore, you should check their play area for any potential hazards, such as electrical cords.

What should you feed your guinea pig?

Like humans and primates, guinea pigs are not able to synthesize vitamin C on their own; therefore, a dietary source of vitamin C must be provided daily. Commercial guinea pig pellets are specially formulated to contain vitamin C. However, vitamin C content is quickly lost, especially if the food is older or is sold in clear plastic bags where the food is exposed to light. Check each brand for a date of manufacture, and look for foods where special care is taken to stabilize the vitamin C content. As vitamin C deficiency appears more common in older pigs, it is possible the requirements change with stress and aging. Your veterinarian may recommend providing additional vitamin C in the form of carefully selected vegetables or vitamin C supplements. Guinea pigs may be offered a daily small handful of dark leafy green vegetables and root vegetables, such as endive and carrots, fresh grass hays, such as Timothy, orchard, and oat, should always be available for adults and alfalfa hay for juveniles. Guinea pigs should have access to fresh, filtered drinking water at all times. Water may be provided in a water bowl and/or bottle. Check water bottles frequently for leakage and obstruction of the super tube. Water bowls must be checked frequently to be sure the guinea pig hasn't kicked bedding into it.

What should you house your guinea pig?

Your guinea pig's enclosure should be at least 2ft x 3ft (60cm x 90cm) per pig. The sides of the enclosure should be at least 12 inches (30 cm) high. The best flooring is solid and covered with dust-free bedding of shredded paper, hay, commercial bedding pellets or recycled paper products. While their fecal pellets are relatively odorless, bedding should be changed at a minimum of once to twice weekly to control urine odors. Guinea pigs are very sensitive to the ammonia in urine, which may irritate their respiratory tract. Cavies are also very sensitive to heat stress, so their environmental temperature should not exceed 75°F (24°C).