



Handle with care

Guinea pigs

Species: Domestic guinea pigs
Scientific names: *Cavia porcellus*

Description

Guinea pigs kept as pets come in a variety of different colours and sizes, but there are three major varieties: the short, smooth-coated breeds (called English American or Bolivian); the harsh-coated rosetted Abyssinians and the long-haired silky-coated Peruvians. Guinea pigs weigh an average of about 1000g and live for about four to seven years. They have a whole range of high-pitched squeaks, chatterings, chirrups and grunts.

Life in the wild

The wild relatives of domestic guinea pigs are grazing animals that live in South America. They are very sociable animals which live in extended family groups in grass and rock crevices and abandoned burrows dug by other animals. Because they are often the prey of larger, meat-eating enemies they are quite nervous and will hide quickly when frightened. In the wild, guinea pigs are an agouti colour which provides them with camouflage.

Source of animals

RSPCA animal centres, reputable breeders and rescue centres are reliable sources for guinea pigs – your local veterinary surgeon may also be able to advise on sources. It is important, wherever possible, to see young guinea pigs with their mothers as this gives owners a good picture of how well they have been cared for, their eventual size and sociability.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before keeping guinea pigs it is crucial that any potential owner finds as much out about them as they can. Only then can they decide if guinea pigs are the right pets for them and if they can provide the specialist care, time, financial means and long-term commitment to look after them properly. Before bringing the guinea pigs home, owners should make sure they have the right accommodation, food and the necessary accessories in place. They should also take the time to speak with other experienced guinea pig keepers and a vet for advice before making a final decision about guinea pig ownership.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Guinea pigs will need regular veterinary care to check their general health and problems like overgrown teeth and claws. They will also need treatment for lice, mites and other parasites if affected. The veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding their care and treatment.

Guinea pigs will need to be looked after every day while you are away on holiday. There are various boarding facilities which look after guinea pigs, but you may have a reliable friend or neighbour who understands their complex needs and is prepared to come and look after them, or who will care for your pets in their own home.

Providing the right accommodation and enclosure for guinea pigs can be expensive.

Health issues to find out about:

- *Diarrhoea*
- *Vitamin C deficiency*
- *Respiratory infections*
- *Pseudotuberculosis*
- *Salmonellosis*
- *Overgrown teeth and claws*
- *Lice*
- *Mites*
- *Fly strike*

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

Healthy guinea pigs are alert and bright eyed, with no signs of discharge around their eyes, ears, mouths and tails. Their breathing should be quiet and regular and they should have clean, glossy coats with no bald patches, lumps or signs of parasites. Their teeth and claws should be of a normal length and not look overgrown. A guinea pig which holds its head on one side and moves around in circles unable to hold a straight line may have a middle ear disease and need veterinary treatment immediately. The guinea pig should walk or run smoothly without any sign of lameness and have an alert, confident appearance.

Why are guinea pigs vulnerable in captivity?

Guinea pigs are completely dependent on their owners to provide the correct accommodation, amount of exercise, food and veterinary care. Guinea pigs also need their owners to keep them clean – if they are not checked on every day, not groomed and allowed to live in dirty conditions they can become victims of fly strike. The strike fly lays its eggs in faeces-covered fur. When the eggs hatch the maggots burrow into the guinea pig's body literally eating it alive. If guinea pigs are not given a diet containing the right amount of Vitamin C, they will suffer and die. Some keepers also attempt to breed guinea pigs and then cannot find homes for the young. Guinea pigs are susceptible to respiratory infections and can catch them from humans. People with coughs and colds should not handle guinea pigs because it is possible to transmit bacterial infections such as Bordetella.

Handling/transporting the animal home

A guinea pig should be approached from the front and on its level. It should be lifted using hands, one around the hindquarters, the other around its shoulders (for a young guinea pig) or around its chest (for an adult). Guinea pigs may become stressed by too much handling. They should be safely confined in a small cat carrying case when travelling. In an emergency they can be carried in a secure cardboard box with holes punched in the sides for ventilation. Guinea pigs should never be left in parked cars on warm days – even with the windows open – they could literally roast to death.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Guinea pigs need to be kept in groups. Two adult guinea pigs that don't know each other may fight so it is best to choose two young littermates of the same sex: two brothers; two sisters; a father and son or a mother and daughter. Guinea pigs and rabbits should not be kept together.

A home for two guinea pigs should measure at least 120cm long x 60cm wide x 60cm high. It should be divided into two connecting compartments one for day with a wire mesh door to let in light and air and one fitted with a solid door to provide a retreat at night – each guinea pig should have its own sleeping area – and from bad weather. A louvred door which can be put over the front of the whole hutch in bad weather is also important.

The home should be weatherproof and raised off the ground to table height – this protects the guinea pigs from rising damp, rats and dogs. It also makes cleaning easier as the dirty litter can just be scraped directly out into a bucket held below. Guinea pigs need a clean layer of wood chippings on the floor of their home and plenty of soft hay for bedding and burrowing. Their home should be cleaned every day and the bedding completely changed each week.

The best location is in a sheltered position, not facing directly into the wind or the midday sun, and in a secure enclosure in which the guinea pigs can exercise during the day. A ramp leading from the hutch to the enclosure floor will enable them to do this easily.

The enclosure should be sunk into the ground, escape proof and safe from predators. It should have rocky caves, a log placed over a scrape of earth and piles of hay in which the guinea pigs can hide if they feel threatened. If there is any threat from dogs or cats then the whole enclosure should be meshed in. If it is not possible to provide an enclosure for exercise then the guinea pigs should be given a grazing ark which can be moved on to fresh grass frequently. The ark should not have a mesh bottom as this can hurt guinea pig feet. In cold weather guinea pigs should be moved into the shelter of a porch or outhouse and a secure exercise area created for them indoors.

Guinea pigs need feeding twice a day with a mixture of meadow hay, green stuff, pellets, washed fruit and vegetables. They also need a constant supply of water in a metal tipped feeding bottle and a gnawing block to wear down their teeth. Guinea pigs can suffer from Vitamin C deficiency so a supplement can be added to their water. They also need to be brushed every day.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.