



Welcoming Home a Guinea Pig

Congratulations on your new pet! Guinea pigs are such great companions, and we know you're going to have fun getting to know them.

This handout goes over some of your new family member's basic needs. There is a lot of misinformation out there about guinea pigs – it seems the pet industry hasn't caught up completely with what is appropriate for our little cavy friends.



Fortunately, there are a lot of good resources out there, too, but to save you some digging, we've outlined some of the best ways to keep your guinea pig happy and healthy.

Appropriate Housing

While guinea pigs can be intrepid explorers, it's always good to have a designated place for them to feel safe, stay contained, and since they can't be litter trained, it's also usually preferable for their human companions to have a cage or pen for their pigs.

A lot of cages marketed for guinea pigs actually aren't really big enough for them. The Humane Society of the United State recommends at least 7.5 square feet of living space for 1-2 guinea pigs, but bigger is better. Just like us, guinea pigs like to have separate places to eat, rest, urinate, and play. Unlike other small animal pets like hamsters or gerbils, they aren't climbers, so they really rely on floor space.

They also require a soft floor, so skip the wire-bottomed cages and opt for one that you can line with 1-2 inches of soft, comfortable bedding to keep their feet happy. When you're shopping for bedding, there are a lot of great options out there. We tend to prefer washable fleece liners or paper bedding.

Finally, for accessories, the main things that guinea pigs need are food (more on that on the next page), fresh water, a place to hide, and some things to chew on! Sometimes, you can even get items that meet both of these needs – edible hideaways are a great option.

Be wary of wood shavings! Guinea pigs have sensitive respiratory, and the oils and dust in some wood shavings can cause health problems. In order to be safe for use for your pig, make sure the wood shavings have been kiln-dried.

Playtime

Foraging through their hay is great fun, but some time exploring outside of their cage or playing with their favorite human is an important part of a guinea pig's day. Every pig is different in terms of how they prefer to play, so provide some tunnels, guinea-pig safe toys, and things to explore and see what they like to do! It's also a great way to build trust with your new little friend. Guinea pigs are also highly social creatures and do best in pairs, so consider getting another cavy friend once you get your new pet settled.

A Complete Diet

Unlike cats and dogs, it's not really possible for guinea pigs to get everything they need from their "kibble" or pellets. While it can be a great supplement for them, **the primary source of a guinea pig's diet should be fresh hay**. You can supply as much as they'll eat or more! Second cutting Timothy Hay is the most recommended to meet their fiber needs!

Guinea pigs also need fresh greens, other vegetables, and fruit in their diet. Just like humans, guinea pigs can get Scurvy, a dangerous and potentially fatal illness associated with a lack of vitamin C, and fresh produce is the best way to get it. Veterinarians recommend about **1 cup of assorted guinea-safe greens, fruits, and other veggies each day**. It should be mostly greens, with a sprinkling of fruit (a few blueberries or a small slice of banana, for instance), and a rotating cast of other vegetables to keep their nutrients balanced and systems happy.



Finally, guineas only need about **two tablespoons of their (species-specific!) pellets** to round out their diet. They might fill up on their pellets and not eat the most important parts of their diet if you give them too much, so we recommend against leaving it out for them to self-regulate.

Fun Fact: Guinea pigs (like rabbits) have to digest their food twice. In the first round, they produce something called a **cecotrope**, a stool that is a bit softer than the typical dry pellet stool that you'll see. You likely won't see cecotropes in their cage, since as soon as they're produced, the animal will re-ingest them. Even though this sounds kind of gross, this is a normal and very important part of their digestive process and ensures that they get all the nutrients they need! If you start seeing the cecotropes around your guinea pig's cage, consult with a veterinarian!

Monitoring Your Guinea Pig's Health

To help make sure your guinea pig lives a long and healthy life (guineas can live up to eight years!), we recommend annual veterinary visits with a practice that treats exotic animals. You should also consult with a vet if you see any signs of illness.

Signs of Illness in Guinea Pigs

- Weight loss
- Weepy eyes
- Drooling/wet chin
- Loose stool
- Discolored urine
- Change in or loss of appetite
- Overgrown teeth
- Change in activity, behavior, or temperament
- Hair loss, bald patches, scratches, lumps, bumps
- Swelling of stomach
- Corner sitting - facing corner, inactive, piloerection (hair on end)

Tip: Given a guinea pig's size, even a small weight change can be a big deal. Weighing your guinea pig on a weekly basis will help you see weight loss before it becomes a big problem. Typically, variance of an ounce is pretty normal, but 2-3 ounces of difference, you should monitor them more carefully and 4 or more ounces – it's time to go to a vet!