

Caring for Guinea Pigs



www.hssv.org

Guinea Pig Facts

- They aren't pigs, and they aren't from New Guinea!
- Natives to South America, they are strict herbivores.
- If well cared for, guinea pigs typically live 5-8 years.
- The average pigs weigh 1.5 - 2.5 pounds.
- They have open rooted teeth that continue to grow throughout their life; wooden blocks, hay, and crunchy treats will keep their teeth in top shape.
- Guinea pigs are highly social herd animals and do best when housed in pairs or groups.

Two is better than one

Guinea pigs are social animals and crave the company of other pigs. Communicating through vocalizations and touch, they will coo and cuddle each other just like people chat about their day and hug each other. A pair of pigs will play, chase, and eat together providing round the clock companionship when they are not with you. A single pig can become very lonely, and this stress could impact their health. To prevent unplanned litters, unaltered guinea pigs should only be housed in same sex groups. Please see our Guinea Pig Pairs sheet for more information on bonding pigs and herd behavior.

Housing – Bigger is Better

Guinea pigs are one of the largest companion rodents and yet most cages marketed for them are way too small. At minimum, your pig needs 7.5 square feet of cage space (30 x 36 inches), and for two pigs 10.5 square feet (30 x 50 inches). Consider how much space your new friend will have once you add his accessories: food dish, hay bale, hide, litter pan, and toys. Room to move promotes happier, and healthier pigs.

Benefits of space include:

- Easier to clean – Larger cages are easier to clean! The more space your pig has the less of an impact waste will make; this also allows your guinea pigs to separate their bathroom area from other activities like eating and play.
- Exercise – Overweight pigs can develop heart disease, diabetes, bladder infections, respiratory problems, bumblefoot, impaction and more. Many pigs are crepuscular, meaning active during dawn and dusk, which may not be the most convenient time for you to play. With a large enough cage, they can exercise whenever they choose.

- Stimulation – Like people, guinea pigs get bored living in the same space day after day. The more space you have the more elaborate you make your pig’s cage. Tunnels to explore and hanging items to nibble are great entertainment!

Many guinea pig parents have found Cubes and Coroplast (C&C) cages are an easy and inexpensive alternative to traditional cage options. Intended for home storage, the cubes are usually 14 inch, coated wire girds that can be connected to build a custom enclosure. There are several brands and sources, a complete overview can be found at: <http://www.guineapigcages.com/cubes.htm>

A clean cage is the first step to a healthy guinea pig! Everyday droppings, uneaten food, and soiled bedding should be removed. Once a week the cage and accessories should be cleaned with warm soapy water and the bedding completely replaced. This also helps to significantly reduce any unpleasant odors! Provide a 2-3” layer of recycled paper bedding on the bottom of the cage to collect waste and provide insulation. Pine or cedar bedding can be harmful to small animals and should be avoided.

Guinea pigs enjoy a room kept at 65 to 75 degrees (Fahrenheit) and can be sensitive to temperature changes. To prevent heatstroke and sudden temperature changes, do not place your pig’s house in direct sunlight or a drafty space. Choose a nice, bright location where people frequently gather to include your new family member. Keep in mind, guinea pigs have sensitive hearing and should not be placed next to stereos, televisions or other loud noises.

Diet

Your guinea pig’s main diet should consist of a high-quality pellet food, unlimited timothy hay, and fresh salads.

Pellets

- Choose pellets that have been fortified with vitamin C (ascorbic acid), as guineas cannot naturally produce vitamin C and need it from their food. Avoid pellet mixes that include seeds or nuts (choking hazard) or dried fruit (unnecessary calories).

Hay

- Hay is a nutritional necessity, providing fiber for digestion and keeping teeth healthy. Good-quality timothy hay is green, feels dry, and smells fresh and sweet. Orchard grass can be provided to add a bit of variety to their diet. Alfalfa hay is very high in calories and calcium, and is typically used for underweight or nursing pigs. More than likely your guinea is already eating an alfalfa based pellet, and would not benefit from additional alfalfa.

Fresh Salads

- Fresh fruit and vegetables add diversity to your pig's meal plan and provide essential nutrients. It's best to check with your vet as to which foods would be best for your guinea pig's dietary needs, as some fruits and vegetables may upset their delicate digestive system. For a nutritional chart visit: <http://www.guinealynx.info/charts.html>

Never give your guinea pig processed people food, especially candy, caffeinated and carbonated beverages, or sticky foods (such as taffy and peanut butter) as they cannot digest them properly and could become very ill. Fresh, clean water should be available at all times; a water bottle with a drinking tube that attaches to the side of the cage are the best way to go.

Starting out on the right paw!

The first 30 days are often the most challenging as you and your new guinea pig get to know each other. Some pigs acclimate quickly to new surroundings, while others may need a few days of alone time to get settled in. Remember to be gentle, loving, and reassuring to your new friend. Here are a few tips to help:

- To pick up the pig, slowly place one hand under his chest just behind the front legs, and gently cup your other hand under his hindquarters. Once you have a firm but gentle grip on the animal, lift him. Then immediately pull him close to your chest or lap so he feels safe.
- G. Pigs are both top and bottom heavy, and should be supported on both ends.
- They are not very flexible and therefore cannot use wheels or balls.
- Gaining trust can be a slow process; your time and patience will be rewarded.
- Be observant to your new pigs health, little animals are fragile and should not wait for vet care. For a list of common guinea pig illnesses visit: <http://www.guinealynx.info/emergency.html>



© Susie Duckworth

Guinea pigs, like dogs, cats, and people communicate through body movement and vocalizations. Here is a list of common piggy behaviors to help you understand your new friend better:

Body Language

- **Popcorning:** hopping straight up in the air, when happy, excited or playful – very cute to watch and the sign of a pleased piggy!
- **Freezing:** startled or uncertain
- **Sniffing:** checking things out
- **Fidgeting** (while being held): your guinea pig needs to go to the bathroom, or is tired of being held
- **Licking:** a sign of guinea pig affection or how tasty you are!
- **Touching Noses:** a friendly greeting between guinea pigs
- **Scent Marking:** guinea pigs will rub their chins, cheeks, and hind ends on items they wish to mark as theirs
- **Tossing Head Up in the Air:** a pig annoyed with being petted will toss their head back as way of asking you to stop

Vocalizations

- **Wheeking:** sounds like a long, loud squeal or whistle; your pig is excited probably about you or food
- **Cooing:** reassurance, often seen between pigs
- **Purring:** If a pig is comfortable they will make a deep calming sounding purr, however if the purr is high pitched your pig may be annoyed
- **Whining:** annoyance or dislike for something
- **Teeth Chattering:** this is a sign of an agitated or angry guinea pig and means "back off" or "stay away."
- **Hissing:** like teeth chattering, these can occur together.
- **Shrieking:** a piercing, high-pitched squeak calls of alarm, fear, or pain. If you hear this type of sound, check on your guinea pigs to make sure everything is okay

For additional guidance, please call us at 408-370-2732.

Helpful Links:

<http://www.hssv.org/behavior.html>

<http://www.guinealynx.info>

<http://www.cavyspirit.com>