



GUINEA PIGS

GENERAL INFORMATION:

Guinea pigs are docile, sociable animals, which make good children's pets. They are usually tame but will bite if frightened. There are three types of domestic guinea pigs used as pets:

1. Short haired English and American varieties.
2. Abyssinian – Short, coarse hair that grows in whorls or rosettes.
3. Peruvian – Have very long hair and are usually used as show animals.

Coat colors of guinea pigs: white, red, tan, brown, chocolate, and black. Coats can be all one color, bi-colored, or tri-colored. There is also a Himalayan color variety, which has a white body with black or chocolate nose, ears, and feet. Brindle describes a coat of mixed black and white hairs, while roan describes a coat of mixed black and red hairs.

Lifespan – 6 to 8 years

Adult Weight – Males – up to 1 kg, Females – 700 to 850 gm

Heart Rate – 230 to 300 beats/minute

Temperature – 99.3 to 103 degrees Fahrenheit

Breeding Life – 2 years

BEHAVIOR:

Guinea pigs are lively, responsive, and gentle pets (particularly if handled frequently at a young age). Guinea pigs are social and seek physical contact with other guinea pigs when housed together. However, there is little mutual grooming. In fact, hair pulling can be a form of aggression, and hair pulling and ear nibbling of subordinate animals is seen in crowded or stressful environments. Their response to danger is freeze or flight. They become immobile if frightened, or try to make an explosive escape. Guinea pigs do not tolerate changes in their diets or environment. Their food preferences are established early in life and will often refuse to eat if their food is changed in type or presentation. Hospitalization of guinea pigs should be minimized because they will become depressed and go off feed. Another behavior of the guinea pig is the performance of coprophagy (eating the soft cecal feces directly from the anus) about 150 to 200 times per day. This appears to be an important function because it may be a source of B vitamins and a way to optimize protein utilization. If coprophagy is prevented, guinea pigs will lose weight, digest fewer fibers, and excrete more minerals in their feces.

Geriatric guinea pigs may develop fecal impactions within the anus, perhaps because of a loss of muscle tone or inability to eat feces directly from the anus. These impactions can be relieved by gentle manual expression, which may have to be repeated weekly.

SEXING:

Guinea pigs are easily sexed. Boars have obvious scrotal pouches and large testes. There is a flat area of tissue between the urethra opening and the anus, in which a shallow slit may be present.

Sows have an Y-shaped depression. The top branches of the Y point towards the guinea pig's head and surrounds the urethra opening. The vulvas opening lies at the intersection of the branches, and the anus is located at the base of the Y.

REPRODUCTION:

Puberty occurs at 2 months of age in females and at 3 months in males. The peak reproductive time for females is from 3 or 4 months to 20 months of age. Pets may reproduce until 4–5 years of age. Guinea pigs are polyestrous and breed year round. The estrous cycle in most females is 15-17 days long and ovulation is spontaneous. There is a fertile post-partum estrus that occurs from 2–10 hours after parturition. The gestation period in guinea pigs is from 59–72 days. Guinea pigs do not build nests. The average litter size is typically two to four pups. Newborn guinea pigs are fully furred with open eyes and are able to stand shortly after birth. The pups should receive sow's milk for a minimum of 5 days, and the normal lactation period is 3 weeks. The pups are weaned at an age of 21 days. Pups begin nibbling on solid food at 2 days of age and guinea pig pellets (moistened with water or formula) can be offered starting at this time.

HOUSING:

Housing should be set up with the knowledge that healthy guinea pigs are extremely messy animals. They produce a large amount of feces and will often defecate in food and water containers and turn over any unstable container. They require relatively simple housing. Pet guinea pigs should be provided with a fairly large amount of floor space. Cages can be constructed of plastic, metal, or wire. Good ventilation is important. If a solid-sided cage, such as an open glass aquarium, is used, the bedding should be changed frequently to minimize ammonia levels in the cage. Guinea pigs do not jump or climb; therefore, the top of the cage does not need to be enclosed. The cage walls should be at least 25 cm in height. The cage floor can be solid or wire mesh, although foot and leg injuries are more common in guinea pigs kept on wire. Newspaper, shredded paper, wood shavings, and straw can be used for bedding on solid floors. A small upside-down cardboard box provides a shelter within the cage. The cage should be placed in a quiet area out of direct sunlight. Recommended temperature ranges for guinea pigs are 65-79 degrees Fahrenheit. Guinea pigs tolerate cool temperatures better than heat and should not be exposed to high temperatures and humidity because they are susceptible to hyperthermia.

NUTRITION AND FEEDING:

Guinea pigs are completely herbivorous.

Guinea pigs develop dietary preferences early in life and do not easily adapt to changes in type, appearance, or presentation of their food or water. Even a change in the brand of pelleted feed can result in refusal of food. It may be a good idea to expose new pets (while they are still young) to small amounts of different guinea pig chows and vegetables so they become accustomed to variety.

Guinea pigs require a dietary source of vitamin C (ascorbic acid). This is because they lack an enzyme involved in the synthesis of ascorbic acid from glucose. Adult non-breeding guinea pigs require 5 mg/kg per day of ascorbic acid. Higher levels should be provided for growing and pregnant animals: 30 mg/kg per day is recommended during pregnancy. A crude protein level of 18-20% is adequate for growth and lactation, and the recommended minimum level of crude fiber is 10%. Commercially available guinea pig pellets usually contain 18-20% crude protein and 10-16% fiber. Pellets are milled with ascorbic acid; however, this vitamin remains active for only 90 days under optimal storage conditions. It is best to assume that the pellets contain no vitamin C and to supply adequate levels of vitamin C in the form of vegetables and fruit or in drinking water. Foods that contain high levels of ascorbic acid include leafy greens such as kale, parsley, beet greens, chicory, and spinach; red and green pepper; broccoli; tomatoes; kiwi fruit; and oranges. Vitamin C can be added to the water at 1 g/L. Water should be changed daily to ensure adequate activity of the vitamin.

The recommended diet for pet guinea pigs consists of guinea pig pellets and alfalfa or grass hay supplemented with fresh vegetables. Usually the pellets are offered free choice. Good quality hay should be available at all times. Guinea pigs enjoy a variety of leafy greens and these can be offered in handfuls. All fresh foods should be washed and prepared as though for human consumption and removed from the cage, if uneaten, after a few hours. Fruits, rolled oats, and dry cereals should be offered, if at all, only in very small amounts as treats. Any additions or changes to the diet should be made gradually.

Guinea pigs need to eat often, so food and water should always be available. They will normally eat 80 mg/kg per day of food, and drink 150 ml/kg per day of water.