

Basic Guinea Pig Care

Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital

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Guinea pigs make wonderful pets. They are relatively easy to care for and will return lots of love and affection. Typically, they can live 7-12 years with proper care and nutrition. They are very interactive, trainable, and need daily attention.

Caging

Guinea pigs need a large enclosure that provides plenty of room for exercise. The larger the cage, the happier the pig! Choose an enclosure that is well ventilated with a solid floor that is easy to clean. Although glass aquariums and cages with solid plastic walls are easy to clean, they are not well ventilated and can make your pig susceptible to respiratory disease. Pigs kept on wire mesh flooring can develop sores on their feet.

Line the bottom of the cage with newspaper or paper towels. Then place shredded paper or paper shavings (Carefresh) for bedding. Wood shavings can harbor mites and can cause itchy skin, so do not use. Carefresh (recycled paper bedding) and Eco-Bedding brand (looks like crinkled brown paper) are excellent choices. Shredded office paper works well too. Your pig's bedding must be kept clean. Replace it as often as you can to avoid ammonia build up from urine. Depending on how much your pig urinates, how many pigs you have, and how big your enclosure is, the bedding will need to be changed every 3-7 days.

Guinea pigs need a place to hide within their cage. Provide a "house" or box made of plastic (pet stores sell them) that your pig can retreat to when she wants to sleep or hide. A pig without a place to hide is continually stressed and more prone to become sick. If you have multiple pigs, provide a hide house for each pig.

Clean your entire cage at least once weekly. If you can smell the cage (especially the urine), it is not clean enough. You can use a mild antibacterial soap to wash the cage. Rinse thoroughly with hot water. To disinfect your pigs' cage, rinse it first with dilute bleach (1 capful to 1 gallon of water) and then rinse again with hot water. It is not necessary to disinfect the cage unless you are trying to prevent illness. Weekly cage cleanings can use just soap and water.

Provide various toys to entertain your pig when she is alone. Cardboard oatmeal canisters, paper towel rolls and wooden chew toys are some possibilities. Guinea pigs love to chew. Keep changing the toys you offer to prevent your pig from becoming bored. Fruit (like apple) tree branches that are not chemically treated make great chew treats.

Diet

Guinea pigs eat a completely vegetarian diet. They should be fed dry, clean orchard grass or timothy hay in unlimited quantities. Be sure to give a fresh handful daily per pig. They should also receive a handful of fresh leafy greens a day. It is important to offer a mixture of at least three types of greens. Dandelion greens, parsley, red leaf, green leaf, field greens, cilantro and carrot tops are great choices. Other vegetables like green, red, orange peppers, cucumbers and carrots are also recommended. We do not recommend feeding dried fruits, nuts/seeds, fresh fruits, flowers, yoghurt drops or other sweet or carbohydrate-rich items to your guinea pig. Strawberry and apples can be given as a treat (sparingly) but if given too much, they can cause digestion issues. Other vegetables that should be fed sparingly are kale, collard greens, spinach, broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower.

A small amount of timothy hay based guinea pig pellets can also be offered daily. Feed approximately 1 Tablespoon of pelleted food daily. NEVER give unlimited amounts of pelleted food! This will cause your pig to become overweight and will predispose her to dental problems. Oxbow makes a very good pelleted food for guinea pigs. Oxbow products can be purchased at our hospital.

Pellets, hay and vegetables/greens should be fed fresh on a daily basis.

Avoid alfalfa hay or pellets. They are too high in calcium and calories and too low in fiber. The large amount of calcium in alfalfa can predispose your pig to the formation of bladder or urethral stones. If you have a very young or thin pig, we may recommend alfalfa hay short term.

Young guinea pigs quickly develop dietary preferences. It is important to offer juveniles a variety of foods to help prevent them from refusing new foods later in life. If you need to change your adult pigs' pelleted food, keep in mind that he or she may go on a hunger strike rather than accept the new food. Watch closely to be sure this doesn't happen. A guinea pig that is not eating can quickly become seriously ill.

Fresh water should be available at all times. Use heavy ceramic bowls or water bottles to avoid spilling. Change your pig's water daily to keep it fresh. Be sure to clean your pig's water bottle or bowl on a regular basis.

Vitamin C

Guinea pigs require vitamin C daily. Unlike most other animals, guinea pigs, humans and some species of bats cannot make the vitamin themselves. Guinea pigs that do not have enough vitamin C in their diet can develop scurvy. Signs of the disease

include bleeding gums, inflamed joints, loose teeth and heart disease. In the worst cases, bones become weak and tend to break even under normal wear.

A juvenile pig needs about 15 milligrams (mg) of vitamin C daily and an adult needs approximately 50 mg each day. We recommend supplementing your pig's diet with vitamin C even if the guinea pig pellets you use are fortified with this vitamin. Approximately half of any vitamin C added to guinea pig food is lost within 90 days of manufacturing. Fortified Vitamin C loses its potency when exposed to light. The best way to supplement your pig with Vitamin C is naturally by having your pig eat approximately ½ of a green or red pepper daily. This will provide the Vitamin C she needs on a daily basis. If she will not eat green or red pepper, try orange or yellow. If this still fails, then offering a Vitamin C supplement daily (Oxbow Vitamin C) in a tablet form is acceptable. We do sell this at the hospital. It is very important if you are giving this supplement that you “see” your pig actually eat it daily.

We do not recommend Vitamin C supplements in the water. As we said before, once Vitamin C sees light, it degrades. So supplemented water is not sufficient to keep your pig healthy.

Exercise

Your pig should have daily exercise. Take her out of the cage and allow her to run around in a contained safe area. There should be nothing she can eat or chew on. Make sure there is no access to cords (electrical or other) as pigs love to bite them. Having them run around and move for at least 30 minutes daily provides a good amount of activity for your pig.

Spaying and neutering

Spaying can prevent some medical conditions in guinea pigs, but is not as critical as it is for pet rabbits. Neutering a male will sometimes help reduce aggression. We do not recommend routine spaying and neutering of pigs unless there is a medical condition that warrants it or you are planning on housing males and females together and you do not want them to breed.

Breeding

Female guinea pigs must be bred for the first time BEFORE they are six months of age or before they reach one pound of weight. The pelvis of the female guinea pig fuses at approximately 6 months of age. If a pig is bred after her pelvis fuses, she will most likely not be able to deliver her babies on her own and will need a caesarean section.

Females will go into heat within thirty minutes of giving birth! Be sure to separate the male from the female before she gives birth. Young guinea pigs should be separated by sex before 8 weeks of age to prevent breeding. Females are sexually mature by 2 months of age and males by 3 months!

Heat Stroke

Guinea pigs have thick fur making them susceptible to heat stroke. It is important to keep in mind that summer weather that is comfortable for you might be too hot for your pig. When the temperature climbs into the upper 70's and higher, it is time to start thinking about cooling off your guinea pig. One way to do this is to place blocks of ice in the cage (soda bottles filled with water and then frozen work well.) Bowls of ice cubes are also fine. A fan or air conditioner in the pig's room is a great way to bring down the environmental temperature. Be sure that the fan or air conditioner is not blowing directly on the cage, however. Another alternative is to move your guinea pig to a cool basement or cellar during very hot days.

If you notice any of the following signs of heat stroke, wrap your guinea pig in a cool (NOT COLD) wet towel and call us immediately:

- " Rapid breathing
- " Bright red ears
- " Lethargy or lying on her side
- " Thick, stringy saliva
- " Diarrhea

Heat stroke is a very serious condition and can quickly lead to death. Seek help right away!

Signs of Illness

Runny eyes, sneezing, diarrhea, lack of appetite, lameness, decreased activity, blood in the urine, and pain are a few of the common signs of disease. Call us as soon as you notice any of these symptoms. It is especially important to call us right away if your pig stops eating or producing a normal amount of fecal pellets. This can be a very serious condition called ileus. Guinea pigs must eat and produce stool daily. If they do not, call us right away.

Hair loss and itchiness are also a concern for pigs. Guinea pigs can get mites from bedding and hay as well as ringworm. Ringworm, which is a fungus, is contagious to people and other pets. If your pig has any hair loss or is excessively itchy, be sure to call.

Most illness is preventable by following a good diet and exercise plan as well as a clean and cared for enclosure.

When To See Us

We recommend yearly exams to evaluate the overall health of your pig. Like most prey species, guinea pigs are adept at hiding signs of disease. Predators target obviously sick or weakened animals and guinea pigs will pretend they are well until they become too sick to hide it any longer. A yearly physical exam will help us catch a problem before it becomes too severe. Yearly fecal examinations are also important, as hay will sometimes bring in intestinal parasites that will cause problems with your pig. If you have any questions regarding the health and care of your pig, please do not hesitate to call us.