

Guinea Pig - Facts & Care Sheet

Geological evidence suggests that guinea pigs have existed for nearly forty million years, and were domesticated between 9000 and 3000 B.C. Guinea pigs have been kept as pets in Europe for at least four hundred years. They were first introduced to Europe in the 16th century by Spanish conquistadors returning from explorations in Central and South America.

One of the world's most popular pets, guinea pigs are inexpensive, undemanding, hardy and sociable creatures. They belong to the rodent group, which includes animals such as squirrels, hamsters and other gnawing creatures.

Do I make a good pet?

Guinea pigs can appear nervous but rarely bite or scratch so with the right supervision can make good pets for children. Inquisitive creatures, they are friendly and talkative. They enjoy being handled regularly too! Guinea pigs can live for four to eight years and both males and females make excellent pets. They break easily if dropped though so the need for adequate supervision should never be underestimated.

Sociable creatures?

Their sociable nature means that they're happiest when they have another guinea pig for company. In their natural habitat guinea pigs prefer to live in colonies. Prolific breeders, as pets they are best kept in same sex pairs, or in groups of females with one neutered male. Male guinea pigs are often friendlier than females. Two guinea pigs that have been purchased at the same time and are of a similar age will usually live happily together.

What type of home do I need?

Guinea pigs can be kept outdoors all year round but they should be brought into a shed or unused garage during winter. Never put your guinea pigs in a used garage as the exhaust fumes from your car can be very dangerous. Outdoor hutches should be draught free and fully weatherproof. The hutch must be raised off the ground to keep the floor dry and to protect your pets from cats and foxes. The base of the hutch should be covered with woodshavings to form an absorbent layer. Fill the bedroom area with a cosy bedding material such as hay or safe bedding so your pets can snuggle up at night. Avoid using straw as this may irritate your guinea pigs' eyes. A run with rocks, large terracotta plant pots, logs and toys for them to play amongst, should be attached to the hutch at all times (size approximately 4ft x 6ft) so that your pigs have constant access. Alternatively, you can keep your guinea pigs indoors in a cage specifically designed for either guinea pigs or rabbits but they should still have permanent access to a run as they will need lots of space to exercise. If you do decide to keep them indoors, place their hutch away from radiators or draughts.

What should you feed me?

There are two types of guinea pig food, muesli and nuggets. Muesli is very nutritional. However, if your guinea pigs pick out the bits of muesli they prefer, they'll miss out on essential nutrients. We call this 'selective feeding'. In contrast, nuggets are extruded - all of the ingredients found in muesli are crushed and shaped into nuggets so your pets gain essential nutrients in every mouthful. We recommend that adult guinea pigs are not kept with adult rabbits as they may fight. Unlike most animals, guinea pigs (like humans!) can't produce their own vitamin C. Vitamin supplements are available and can simply be added to your pets' water but this is no substitute for small daily quantities of fresh vegetables or fruit such as apple, cabbage, kale, tomatoes, green peppers, carrots, strawberries and broccoli. Always introduce new foods slowly to avoid stomach upsets. Guinea pigs need extra fibre in their diet to aid digestion. Hay is a natural long fibre and should always be available in your pets' hutch or cage. It also helps to grind guinea pigs' teeth down, preventing them from growing too long and becoming painful. Only small quantities of shop bought food should be given daily, hay is the healthiest option and should always be the mainstay. Fresh food should be given to

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your guinea pigs in the morning and if it remains uneaten, remove it before it begins to rot. Heavy ceramic feeding bowls are ideal for guinea pigs as they're difficult to knock over and are easy to clean. Give your pets fresh water daily.

Playtime

If left alone in their cage or hutch when you're not around, your guinea pigs will get very bored. Providing toys for them to gnaw on and hiding treats around their cage will enhance their quality of life. Houses and hideaway holes will allow your pets to snuggle up just as they would in the wild and wooden or willow toys are not only fun to play with, they help to grind their teeth down too!

How to handle me

Your new guinea pigs are likely to be nervous when you take them home so you shouldn't handle them initially. During the first few days simply talk to them. You can then start to gently stroke them and when they become more comfortable and confident, pick them up. Using both hands, place one hand under your guinea pig's chest so its front legs are either side of your fingers and use your other hand to support its neck and back. Hold your pet close to you to prevent it from wriggling and falling. Once they get to know you they'll love being held.

Personal hygiene

Guinea pigs are generally very clean. Replace soiled bedding daily and clean the entire hutch or cage thoroughly with a pet-safe disinfectant once a week.

Health and fitness

A healthy diet and hygienic conditions will help to keep your guinea pigs in good health but there are a number of potential problems that you should be aware of. As with all rodents, guinea pigs' teeth grow constantly so it's important to provide them with wooden toys, mineral stones or treats to gnaw on. Vitamin C is essential and should be provided in your pets' food. A vitamin C deficiency weakens the immune system making your guinea pigs more susceptible to illness. You can also add a vitamin supplement to their water. Regularly grooming your guinea pigs helps to strengthen the bond between you. It's especially important to groom long-haired breeds daily to keep their coats shiny and clean. Healthy guinea pigs are alert with bright eyes, dry nostrils and a clean, shiny coat. There should be no sign of thinning fur or bald patches. Droppings in your pets' hutch should be small, firm pellets. If your pet shows signs of being unwell take them to a vet immediately.



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Top tips for a healthy pet

Dental

Hay and gnawing toys are an essential part of your pets' dental routine and should always be available as they help to prevent overgrown teeth.

Vitamins and supplements

Vitamins can be added to your pets' food or water. Probiotic supplements can help to maintain healthy digestion and relieve stress. Getting used to their new surroundings can be stressful for your guinea pigs so consider buying probiotic supplements when you take them home. As well as being good for your guinea pigs' teeth, hay is an essential part of the digestive process.

Grooming

Regular grooming will strengthen the relationship between you and your pets and it can also help to highlight health problems. Groom your guinea pigs once a week or daily if they have long hair.

Fleas, mites and flies

Keep an eye on your pets' skin and coat for signs of fleas and mites such as bald patches or irritation. Outdoor pets are vulnerable to flystrike during the summer months so make sure you keep your pets and their environment clean and dry.

Cleaning and hygiene

Clean out your pets' home at least once a week using a pet-safe disinfectant.