

## GUINEA PIG CARE

Guinea pigs (*Cavia porcellus*) are originally from the South American Andes where they were domesticated thousands of years ago. The guinea pig as we know it today does not exist in the wild. They make endearing pets, especially if well socialized. Being a prey species, it is important to handle them gently so as not to frighten them.

**Longevity:** 5 to 7 years in captivity

### **Sociability:**

- Guinea pigs are social animals so it is best to have more than one.
- For breeding purposes it is usually acceptable to have 1 male to up to 10 females in the same enclosure – provided it is large enough.
- If you are not intending to breed, have the males neutered or ensure you have all females or all males.
- Males will tolerate one another best if they grow up together, groups of males do not get along so should only be housed as pairs.
- Entire (un-neutered) males may fight, so castration is recommended.

### **Environment:**

- The minimum space for a pair requirements recommended by the RSPCA are 120cm x 60cm x 45cm of floor space, although having as much space as you can over the minimum is advised. Indoor housing during inclement weather is essential.
- Shelter is vital even in indoor housing as these animals do not like being out in the open. This may take the form of upturned cardboard boxes or something more permanent. The cage should be placed in a quiet area away from possible predators such as dogs, cats and foxes.
- Guinea pigs do not tolerate temperatures above 26 degrees. The ideal temperature is between 20 – 22 degrees Celsius and humidity is between 40 – 70%.
- Having an outside predator proof grazing run is important. Guinea pigs need exposure to sunlight to stay healthy and grazing on grass is a natural and important part of their management. Outside hutches should have a sheltered area to prevent them from being exposed to too much heat, cold or rain. They should be housed indoors during the winter months.



- Although many people choose to keep guinea pigs together with rabbits this is not advised. Rabbits can carry a bacteria called *Bordetella bronchiseptica* which can cause a fatal respiratory infection in guinea pigs. Rabbits will also often bully guinea pigs which can lead to injury or deprivation of food and water. Rabbits and guinea pigs also have different dietary requirements.
- Don't forget to provide environmental enrichment by giving them plastic tubes, cardboard boxes, fruit tree branches (check to make sure they have not been treated with chemicals and avoid cherry trees or others which are poisonous) and other things to keep them entertained.

#### Diet:

- Guinea pigs develop preferences for foods early in life and will often stop eating entirely if the diet, presentation or appearance of their food or water changes. For this reason, it is important to expose young guinea pigs to a large array of different vegetables, pellets of different brands and tastes for them to accept them later in life.
- There are two essential requirements in a guinea pig diet: Fibre and Vitamin C. Guinea pigs are unable to produce their own vitamin C and therefore have to have a source of this in their diet. Pellets for this species do contain vitamin C but the level reduces with storage time. Supplementation of vitamin C is best achieved by crushing a vitamin C tablet and sprinkling a small pinch of the crushed tablet on their food each day. Vitamin C is unstable in water so pet shop bought vitamin drops or powders that suggest adding to water should be changed daily.
- Fibre – the second essential requirement for a guinea pig diet is provided by giving your guinea pig access to as much hay as they can eat. Fibre aids with digestion and is very important for wearing down their continuously growing teeth. Guinea pigs may choose to eat too much pelleted food and not enough hay if you do not restrict how much dry food they are given. This makes them very prone to dental disease.
- A recommended diet for any healthy guinea pig should consist of as much good quality hay and grass as possible. Timothy, meadow or grass hays are best (alfalfa or Lucerne hays have too much calcium in them) a **small** quantity of guinea pig pellets (not ad libitum) and vegetables. Greens and vegetables such as dandelion, groundsel, cow parsley, bok choi, spinach, red and green pepper, broccoli, kiwi fruit, tomatoes and oranges are fine. Avoid treats with a lot of carbohydrates such as corn, seeds, or sugars.
- Muesli mixes should never be fed as guinea pigs only eat one or two ingredients and this leads to poor nutrition and health problems.
- Fresh water should be provided every day. If sipper bottles are used, take care to check they are working every morning.

#### Preventative Healthcare:

- Guinea pigs do not require any yearly vaccinations or worming

We recommend annual health checks every year for pet guinea pigs as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**



**Insurance:**

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

**Common Health Complaints:**

- Pododermatitis (inflammation of the skin of the feet) can occur due to hard flooring and obesity. It is very important to provide a washable or disposable floor covering if the cage is wire floored. These pets can easily damage their feet or break legs on wire flooring so either a deep bed of hay (5cm) changed 1 – 2 times a week or shredded paper, wood shavings (not pine or cedar), fleece blankets or linoleum which can be easily cleaned.
- Respiratory tract infections are very common. There are many causes but they can develop as a result of poor cage hygiene and lack of ventilation. Sneezing and nasal discharge are signs of upper respiratory tract infection but lower respiratory tract disease such as pneumonia can be hard to detect
- Skin disease such as mites and ring worm is also common especially in young, stressed or unwell guinea pigs with compromised immune systems
- Dental disease is common and can be caused by incorrect diet (not enough hay or grass or too many treats or pellets). It can also be caused by tooth infections and more serious disease such as kidney disease.
- Urinary tract disease such as infections or urinary stones are not uncommon. You may notice blood in the urine, no urine being produced or straining to urinate.
- Vitamin C deficiency is very common. This vitamin is essential for normal health of skin, joints, teeth, immune system function. Deficiencies may present in many different ways from lameness to skin problems.
- Cystic ovarian disease is common in middle aged female guinea pigs and can be detected at an annual health examination
- Male entire guinea pigs are prone to the accumulation of faeces in the rectum or 'rectal impaction'. It does not happen in males who are neutered and is thought to be due to the influence of testosterone on the local muscles. There is no cure but it is important to remove accumulated faeces from inside the rectal folds at least once a day as the risk of fly strike (maggots) being attracted to the faeces is high.
- Gut stasis is a condition characterised by the production of less faeces or sometimes no faeces at all. It is often mistaken for constipation. It can be caused by any underlying illness or stress and requires prompt treatment.

