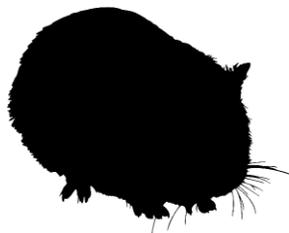


GUINEA PIGS

~by Dr. Kay Bishop; APS of Durham Veterinarian



Basic Information

Life Span: Average 5-6 years.

Personality: Guinea pigs are lively, gentle and responsive pets, particularly if handled frequently at a young age. Their typical response to perceived danger is “freeze or flight,” tending to become very still when frightened or, to make an explosive attempt at escape. However, they are rarely aggressive. Guinea pigs do not tolerate sudden changes in diet or environment.

Housing

Cage: Minimum size for a single Guinea pig is 30”(L)x18”(W)x12”(H), but larger cages are strongly recommended. Larger cages allow for adequate exercise and mental stimulation. For instructions on how to build a cage that is spacious, inexpensive and easy to clean, please visit the website www.guineapigcages.com. Solid-sided enclosures, such as glass aquariums, should not be used due to poor ventilation. Placing the cage into a shallow cardboard box with the sides cut to a height of 5” can reduce the amount of debris scattered out the sides of the cage.

Flooring: Cages are available commercially with either solid or wire mesh flooring. Wire mesh flooring can result in injuries to the feet and legs. Housing on wire over long periods of time can result in footpad infections, and broken legs are common in Guinea pigs that fall through the wire mesh and panic to escape. For these reasons, solid flooring is recommended, or at a minimum, wire mesh floors should have a solid platform as a resting place in one area of the cage.

Bedding: Recycled paper bedding (CareFresh) is the best choice for bedding. Aspen wood shavings, shredded paper, and pelleted recycled newspaper are also acceptable beddings. Cedar and pine shavings should not be used, as they have been shown to cause respiratory and liver disease in Guinea pigs. Corncob beddings are available but may contain fungal spores that can potentially cause disease, and should be avoided. Bedding should be changed completely once a week, and any obviously wet spots removed daily.

Hide Box: Guinea pigs must be provided with some sort of dark shelter in the cage. Many varieties are commercially available, but a small cardboard box with a hole cut for entry works well in most cases. This allows your pet a “safe” place to hide when it is stressed.

Food Dishes: Dishes should be made of heavy ceramic, and must be cleaned daily, as Guinea pigs tend to defecate in them.

Cage Location: The cage should be placed in a quiet area away from direct sunlight. Recommended temperature range is 60-75F. Guinea pigs tolerate cool temperatures better than heat, and are easily over heated (prone to heat stroke).

Diet

Dietary Preferences: Guinea pigs establish strong dietary preferences early in life. Changes in diet must be made very gradually to avoid a refusal to eat. It is a good idea to get Guinea pigs accustomed to a variety of foods (pellets, hay and fresh vegetables) early in life.

Pellets: A wide variety of commercial pellets formulated for Guinea pigs are available. Rabbit pellets are not an acceptable substitute, as they may contain toxic levels of vitamin D and are deficient in vitamin C and folic acid. Guinea pig pellets should be used within 90 days of the milling date (on the package) to maximize the amount of vitamin C, which degrades with time. Guinea pigs fed exclusively pellets are often malnourished due to insufficient fiber and vitamin C in the diet. Obesity is a common problem in mature pigs, and pellet intake should be restricted to 1/8-cup pellets per 2 pounds of Guinea pig per day. Young, growing, or pregnant Guinea pigs should eat alfalfa-based pellets, while Timothy-based pellets (Oxbow or Kaytee brand) are more appropriate for adults.

Hay: Fresh, clean grass or timothy hay should be available at all times. Alfalfa hay should not be given on a regular basis due to high levels of calcium that can lead to urinary tract disease. The fiber present in hay is important for maintaining a healthy gastrointestinal tract, and the abrasiveness helps to wear down the continuously growing cheek teeth.

Fresh Vegetables: Guinea pigs are unable to synthesize vitamin C, and therefore must eat foods rich in vitamin C to meet their requirements. The best way to meet this requirement is daily feeding of fresh, washed vegetables high in vitamin C. Foods that contain high levels of vitamin C include leafy greens (kale, romaine lettuce, mustard and collard greens, dandelion greens, spinach), red and green pepper, broccoli, kiwis and oranges. Fresh food should be offered daily (1/2 to 1 cup chopped) and the uneaten portion removed to prevent contamination.

Vitamin C: As noted above, Guinea pigs are unable to synthesize vitamin C. Although the best way to meet the requirement for vitamin C is by feeding fresh foods containing the nutrient, occasionally additional supplementation is warranted (e.g. a pig that refuses to eat fresh veggies-persistence usually pays off, so keep offering them!). The best way to supplement vitamin C is by using a chewable tablet (manufactured by Oxbow). Give 1 tablet daily per adult pig.

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Water: Clean, fresh water should be available at all times. Water bottles with sipper tubes help decrease the mess associated with tipped water bowls. Clean the bottle and tube with hot, soapy water daily. Soggy bedding from spilled water should be removed daily to prevent bacterial and fungal growth. Placing a corner litter pan containing pelleted newspaper litter (Yesterday's news) beneath the water bottle sipper tube will help catch any drips and can be changed out as needed (usually every other day).

Litter Training: Most Guinea pigs will not ever become fully litter trained. However, placing litter pans in the cage corners that are used most for elimination can help tremendously in keeping the cage clean between full weekly bedding changes.

Medical Care

Physical Exam: The first exam should take place ideally soon after adoption. The exam will include discussion of diet and husbandry, as well as identifying any existing health problems. Exams should be performed on an annual to semi-annual basis depending on the age and condition of the individual animal.

Dental Care: Guinea pigs have continuously growing teeth (both incisors and cheek teeth), and require high amounts of dietary fiber (hay is ideal) to keep these teeth ground down to normal levels. The teeth should be examined at least annually, more often if drooling, reluctance to eat or dropping food from the mouth are noted. Overgrown teeth generally require general anesthesia to allow trimming and filing.

Intestinal Parasites: A fecal examination should be performed at the initial visit, and then on an as needed basis depending on the condition of the individual animal.

Grooming: Weekly brushing with a soft bristle brush helps keep the skin and coat healthy, and reduces shedding. Most Guinea pigs love to be brushed! Nails need to be trimmed monthly. Bathing is rarely needed for healthy Guinea pigs.

Fleas: Flea powders labeled for use in cats can be used safely on Guinea pigs.

Shopping List

- Bedding
- Plastic Igloo
- Ceramic Food Dishes
- Large Water Bottle
- Corner Litter Pan
- Timothy Hay
- Pellets
- Fresh Food
- Vitamin C Tablets
- Soft Bristle Brush
- Nail Trimmers

Additional Items

- Toys:** Hanging wooden bird toy with a bell; cardboard boxes, paper bags, untreated wooden spoons, untreated wicker baskets, some hard plastic cat toys, stuffed animals--be careful he doesn't eat the stuffing!
- Bed:** Fleece lined small animal bed or small oval cat bed pinned together to make a 'taco.'
- Additional Hiding Places:** Wooden hide box, grass hut, cardboard boxes with holes, plastic step stool, etc
- Play Pen**
- Hay Container:** Untreated wicker baskets, paper bags, and empty cardboard food boxes to put hay in.

Feeding

- 1/8-1/4 cup pellets (timothy-based)
- Free choice hay (he should never run out!)
- One vitamin C tablet (put in dish on top of pellets)
- 1 cup fresh salad (leafy greens-kale, romaine, parsley, mustard or collard greens; small amounts of low starch veggies-cucumber, bell peppers, pea pods, broccoli; very small amounts of fruit)
- One orange wedge (about 1/6 of a medium-sized orange)
- Fresh water (refill the bottle with fresh water every day or two; thoroughly scrub the bottle, sipper tube and rubber ring once a week in hot, soapy water)

We really recommend the Oxbow brand pellets, hay and vitamin C tablets. You can purchase these locally at Animall (www.animall.org) located in the Prime Outlets of Morrisville (at the airport mall), or at Phydeaux in Carrboro; or you can order directly from the company (www.oxbowhay.com). The quality of the nutrition is far superior to what you will find at the larger chain pet stores, and worth the extra effort. Kaytee Timothy Complete is the only timothy based pellet you can find at PetSmart or Petco. All of the other brands are alfalfa based, which is not appropriate for adult pigs.

