

## Caring for Guinea Pigs

- Guinea pigs are docile and rarely bite or scratch.
- Guinea pigs can be adopted from shelters or rescue groups.
- Guinea pigs should be fed a pelleted guinea pig diet containing vitamin C.
- When guinea pigs are not in their cage, constant supervision is required to prevent them from chewing on dangerous items, such as electrical wires and plants that can be toxic.
- Guinea pigs should be kept in an environment that is 65°F to 75°F (18°C to 24°C).

Mild-mannered and cute, guinea pigs can be great pets. They're fairly easy to care for, but they do require some special care as well as regular veterinary checkups, comfortable housing, and attention from their owners.

Guinea pigs are originally from the grasslands, forests, swamps, and mountains of South America. They are also called *cavies*, which is short for their scientific name: *Cavia porcellus*.

## Biological Facts

- Life span: 5 to 6 years
- Weight: 1.65 to 2.65 lb (750 to 1200 g; males are larger than females)
- Sexual maturity: 4 to 8 weeks of age (Because guinea pigs reproduce rapidly, keeping males and females together is not recommended.)
- Duration of pregnancy: 59 to 73 days (shorter for larger litters)
- Average litter size: three (They are born fully furred with eyes open.)
- Breeds: at least 13

## Behavior

Guinea pigs are docile and rarely bite or scratch. However, they can be easily stressed: when frightened, they may run at high speeds. They vocalize often, using a variety of squeaks, purrs, growls, and squeals. They are known for squeaking with delight when their favorite people come near. Guinea pigs are highly social and live in small groups in the wild. Keeping more than one guinea pig provides them with companionship. Keeping only same-sex guinea pigs prevents mating. To prevent fighting among male guinea pigs, they should be either neutered or introduced to each other before weaning is complete.

## Diet

Guinea pigs are herbivores (plant eaters). They can eat large quantities of grass hay, such as timothy, brome, and Bermuda grass. Chewing prevents overgrowth of teeth, and fiber aids

digestion. Guinea pigs can't naturally produce vitamin C, so they must receive it through the diet or supplements. Good sources of vitamin C include strawberries, honeydew melon, raspberries, kiwi, oranges, parsley, and red and green peppers. Commercial vitamin C tablets made specifically for guinea pigs are also available. Bite-sized pieces of fresh fruits and vegetables can be fed daily; half a handful of vegetables and a slice of fruit per day is plenty.

Guinea pigs should be fed approximately 1/8 cup per day of a pelleted guinea pig diet containing vitamin C. Food pellets for other animals (such as rabbits) do not provide enough vitamin C for guinea pigs. Reproducing sows (females) and juveniles (up to 6 months of age) should be fed alfalfa-based pellets, which are high in calcium and protein. Adult guinea pigs should be fed timothy hay-based pellets. Dietary changes should be gradual to prevent stomach upset.

A good feeding schedule is to divide your guinea pig's total daily amount of vegetables, fruit, and pellets into two feedings each day, providing half of the total amount at each feeding. Hay should be available for your guinea pig at all times.

Fresh water should be provided daily. A drip bottle attached to the cage can ensure that clean water is available throughout the day.

### *Environment*

Guinea pigs require a well-ventilated cage made of plastic, metal, or wire, with a solid cage floor to prevent injuries to the legs and feet. If wire is used, it should be nongalvanized wire; galvanized wire can be poisonous to guinea pigs if they chew on it. To help avoid foot sensitivity, solid plastic flooring is preferred to harder or rougher surfaces. Seven square feet of space per pig is recommended. The cage should be placed in a quiet location away from direct sunlight, and the temperature should be maintained at 65°F to 75°F (18°C to 24°C). To prevent heat stress, high humidity and temperatures above 80°F (26°C) should be avoided.

The bedding should be composed of a thick layer of fiber, such as aspen shavings; soft recycled newspaper litter (not hard pellets); or grass hay. Cedar or pine shavings should be avoided because they can irritate the respiratory tract. Dust can also cause respiratory problems, so all bedding should be as dust-free as possible. Soiled shavings, droppings, and stale food should be removed daily. The cage should be cleaned completely at least once a week by replacing the bedding and washing the bottom of the cage with warm water. The cage should be dry before fresh bedding is added. Guinea pigs can be trained to use a litterbox, but this requires a lot of time and patience.

A nest box made of cardboard should be provided for a sense of security. Guinea pigs like to hide when they play, so hiding places (such as cardboard tubes, empty coffee cans with smoothed edges, plastic pipes, and flower pots) should be provided.

For exercise, guinea pigs can be allowed to play in a small room or secure enclosed area. When guinea pigs are not in their cage, constant supervision is required to prevent them from chewing on dangerous items, including electrical wires and plants that can be toxic.

### *Health Care*

Although guinea pigs don't require any vaccinations, regular visits to your veterinarian are recommended. Common signs of illness include sneezing, coughing, diarrhea, and lethargy.

(tiredness). In addition, guinea pigs are susceptible to external parasites such as mites and lice. If you think your guinea pig is sick, consult your veterinarian immediately. The following will help keep your guinea pig healthy:

- Complete regular physical examinations
- Regular fecal examination for parasites
- Regular toenail trimming and combing/brushing (Longhaired breeds should be combed/brushed daily.)
- Regular exercise to prevent obesity

Because guinea pigs' teeth grow continuously, something to gnaw on should be available at all times (for example, branches and twigs from untreated trees or a small piece of wood that hasn't been treated with chemicals).

### **Supplies**

- Solid-bottomed cage with wire cover or plastic-bottomed "tub" cage (7 sq ft of space per pig is recommended)
- Guinea pig pelleted food
- Aspen shavings or soft recycled paper bedding
- Grass hay
- Cardboard boxes, plastic pipes, and appropriate toys
- Flower pot or covered sleeping box
- Brush and comb
- A small, heavy ceramic food dish
- Attachable water bottle with a drinking tube
- Unpainted, untreated wood or a safe chew toy