

CARING FOR YOUR GUINEA PIG

Guinea pigs – or cavies, to give them their proper name – are fascinating, intelligent and, when handled correctly, friendly. They originate from South America and there are eight species, but only one – the domestic cavy – is kept as a pet.

Guinea pigs live for around four to eight years, so their care is a long-term commitment. Males are known as boars and females are called sows. Guinea pigs need company of their own kind and can be kept in same sex groups or in pairs. Don't forget, if you're planning to keep a male and female together, it's essential that the male is neutered to avoid unwanted babies. It takes around four weeks for a male to become sterile after being neutered.

It's a good idea to phone around and find a vet who has experience of neutering small pets like guinea pigs.

Animal charities like Blue Cross have guinea pigs that need good homes. Alternatively, you could contact a reputable breeder. If you're looking for babies, they should be at least six weeks old. If you buy from a pet shop, make sure the animals have been kept in same sex groups and that the staff can show you the difference between males and females.

HOME COMFORTS

Guinea pigs are curious and like to see what's going on, so they can be kept either indoors or out. However, they have sensitive hearing so, unless your home is quiet, they are usually happiest outdoors.

They need a large predator-proof wooden hutch and run. Each hutch should have a separate sleeping area where the guinea pigs can retreat out of sight to get some peace and quiet. The hutch and run should be out of direct sunlight in a weatherproof, draught-proof shed, as guinea pigs are vulnerable to all extremes of weather. Do not keep guinea pigs – or any other animals – in a garage used to keep vehicles because the fumes can kill them.

Extra shelter and bedding must be provided during the winter months. Soft straw can be used but has no nutritional value so the best bedding you can use is hay, which also makes up the largest component of their food. If you use wood shavings they must be dust-free and you should avoid cedar shavings as they can cause health problems. Never use fluffy bedding because it can get wrapped around limbs and injure a guinea pig and it doesn't dissolve if eaten.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As guinea pigs are naturally grazing animals, it's important that they always have quality, bagged, non-dusty hay to keep their digestive systems working, along with a small amount guinea pig mix. They also need some fruit and vegetables to give them a source of vitamin C because guinea pigs lack the enzyme to produce this themselves. Melons, oranges and dark green, leafy vegetables like spinach, broccoli, kale and cabbage are all good sources. Never give your guinea pig lettuce as this can cause diarrhoea. Hay and vegetables are just as important as guinea pig mix so don't rely solely on mix to feed your pet.

Put food in earthenware bowls (which are hard to tip over), or stainless steel bowls that clip on to the front of the hutch. Clean, fresh water from a gravity bottle must be available at all times and changed every day. Do not give guinea pigs rabbit food because they have different nutritional requirements. Guinea pigs can become obese if they are fed too much.

HEALTH MATTERS

A healthy guinea pig is alert, with bright eyes and a good coat. One of the most common problems in guinea pigs is bumblefoot, where the foot becomes swollen due to a bacterial infection, often caused by dirty bedding. They are also prone to eye problems, so it is important to use dust-free bedding. Other conditions to watch out for include mange (itchy skin), dental problems caused by not enough fibre and obesity from being fed too many treats. Skin problems are common in guinea pigs. If you have any concerns about your guinea pig's health, seek your vet's advice.

Grooming is a vital part of the routine care of guinea pigs. Long-haired varieties need daily grooming as their coats can quickly become matted and uncomfortable. Female guinea pigs reach sexual maturity at four to five weeks old and males at eight to nine weeks. Do not be tempted to allow your guinea pigs to breed, as there are risks associated with pregnancy and birth. Females that do not breed by the age of six to eight months can become pregnant, but they are physically unable to give birth as the pelvic bones fuse by this age. Male guinea pigs should be neutered so they can live as a pair with a female without breeding.

EXERCISE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Provide your guinea pigs with as much floor space as possible – a hutch for two should not be less than 1.2m long by 60cm wide. They also need an outdoor run accessible from the hutch so they can graze. They can be allowed to run free indoors under supervision. Make sure all doors are closed, there are no escape holes and that cats and dogs are kept out of the room.

Guinea pigs are not usually interested in toys but some enjoy exploring cardboard boxes and running through tubes or pipes. You could also try hiding small amounts of food around the cage to help keep your guinea pigs alert and active.

COMPANY

Your pet should only have other guinea pigs as companions. Never keep guinea pigs in the same hutch or run as rabbits, as there is a risk the guinea pigs will be bullied and seriously injured. The best combination is a pair or small group of the same sex, although neutered males and females may get along.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Guinea pigs are friendly and most are happy to be handled once they have got used to their new surroundings. Always use both hands to pick up a guinea pig. Place one hand across their shoulders with your thumb tucked behind the shoulder and fingers wrapped around the ribs. Hold tightly enough to be secure without squeezing and put your other hand underneath the hindquarters for support. Hold the guinea pig close to your body or sit down and put them on your lap so they feel secure.

GUINEA PIGS AS CHILDREN'S PETS

Guinea pigs can make good pets for adults or children. As guinea pigs are active during the day, you can have lots of fun just watching them.

They communicate vocally and different noises have different meanings. A cooing sound gives reassurance, while a squeak can be a warning – a sign that the guinea pig is frightened or anticipation that food is coming! They're unhappy when left alone in a hutch in the garden because they need company.

Guinea pigs are gentle animals and make good children's pets but you need to think about the fact that they have quite a long lifespan. They can live as long as seven years, so they might outlive a child's interest. This is why it is important that the adults in the household share the children's interest in the guinea pig. As with all small pets, an adult needs to be responsible for ensuring that the children provide the correct care and attention.

DON'T FORGET...

- Guinea pigs have a long lifespan compared to other small animals
- Guinea pigs need company of their own kind, either in a pair or in a small group of the same sex
- Do not keep a breeding pair. If you are planning to keep a male and female together, talk to your vet about having the male neutered

- Do not keep guinea pigs and rabbits in the same hutch or run, as the guinea pigs may be bullied and severely injured
- Make sure your guinea pigs always have dust-extracted hay to keep their digestive systems working and, a constant supply of clean water