

# Pet Guinea Pig Basics



**N**ative to the Andes mountains of South America, Guinea pigs are rodents related to the chinchilla and the porcupine. There are 11 breeds and 23 varieties (colors) of Guinea pigs, which are also known as cavies. The three most common breeds are the Abyssinian (rough, short coat with cowlicks) the American or English (classic short hair) and the Peruvian (longhair). Wild Guinea pigs are herbivores, consuming a variety of vegetation. Because they feed continuously, healthy guinea pigs make frequent, formed fecal pellets. Guinea pigs also normally produce and ingest softer stools throughout the day. These are called cecotropes, and provide them with important proteins and vitamins. Guinea pigs are social and tend to do better in bonded pairs or trios. They are fully haired and able to eat solid foods soon after birth. Generally, Guinea pigs live about 4-5 years, but may live to 7-8 years with proper care.

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## Caging

Guinea pigs are best kept in an open top enclosure at least 1' wide x 2' long with walls at least 12" high. A solid floor is recommended with dust-free bedding (pine shaving or recycled newspaper), which should be changed weekly. Wire-bottom cages are not recommended because they lead to foot problems. Fresh water should be provided daily in a sipper bottle.

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## Nutrition

A high fiber diet is essential for optimal Guinea pig health. Guinea pigs may be often reluctant to try new food items and it may take 1- 4 weeks for a new item to be recognized. Always add new food items gradually to avoid gastrointestinal upset. Guinea pigs are unusual among rodents in that they have a high dietary requirement for vitamin C.

1. Fresh timothy hay should comprise 50% of the diet

Alfalfa hay is not recommended for most adult Guinea pigs as it is too high in calcium content and calories, but can be offered free choice to young, pregnant or underweight Guinea pigs.

2. Fresh vegetables should be offered twice daily

Emphasize dark leafy vegetables. Carrots are an acceptable treat

3. High fiber Guinea pig pellets

- *Do not* feed rabbit or other rodent pellets
- *Do not* feed gourmet pellets that have seeds or nuts
- Buy fresh pellets every 30 days as vitamin C content dissipates quickly

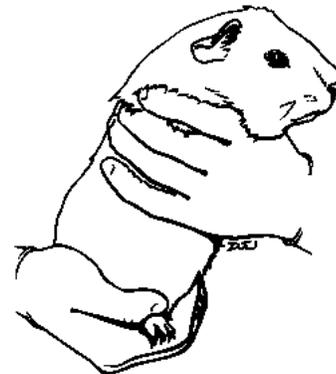
4. Vitamin C supplement (50 mg/day per animal)

- Offer one quarter of an orange per day to ensure adequate vitamin C
- Liquid vitamin C supplements can be added to
- water as an alternative
- Vegetables high in vitamin C include: spinach,
- kale, parsley, chicory, red, yellow and bell peppers

5. Treats

- If not overweight, a small amount of high fiber fruit can be offered (apple, peach, plum, pear, melon, raspberry, papaya, blueberry, blackberry, strawberry, pineapple); Avoid sugary fruits such as bananas and grapes.

- *Do not* feed cereals, bread, oats, corn, seeds, nuts!



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## Common Diseases

1. Scurvy (Vitamin C deficiency)

Probably the most commonly encountered health problem in Guinea pigs. Young, growing animals are most susceptible and sick Guinea pigs need

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additional vitamin C. Affected Guinea pigs exhibit a rough hair coat and have trouble eating. They often have painful joints and are predisposed to foot sores.

### 2. Gastrointestinal and Dental Disease

Gastrointestinal problems are often secondary to dental disease or an inappropriate diet. Loss of appetite is a frequent problem. Guinea pigs are very sensitive to changes in the diet; a new brand of pellet may be enough to create inappetence. They can also develop gastrointestinal stasis from food impactions and hairballs. Since they cannot vomit, Guinea pigs with colic will often grind their teeth, may be bloated and pass small, hard stools. Rectal impactions in older Guinea pigs occur from build-up of soft stools and loss of anal tone.

Guinea pig teeth grow continually, about 10 cm a year! The vegetation in their native environment is tough and fibrous and results in continual wear of the teeth. A diet low in fiber may lead to the development of overgrown teeth, tooth root abscesses, points, spurs, and abnormal wear. Guinea pigs with dental disease will often drool and stop eating.

### 3. Hair, Skin and Foot Problems

Hair loss can be self-induced or spontaneous. Stressed, bored or dominant individuals may chew their own or cage mate's fur. A Guinea pig may also pull and chew at hair over sites of pain, especially the limbs and abdomen. Other causes of skin problems are frequently mite infestation or ringworm. Guinea pigs that develop swellings should be examined for abscesses or tumors. It is important to brush longhaired species regularly to minimize matting and ingestion of hair.

Pressure sores, also called bumblefoot are especially a concern in older Guinea pigs. Obesity, vitamin C deficiency and wire bottom cages are often predisposing factors. Affected individuals are lame, lethargic, and often lose their appetites. Severe bumblefoot can lead to bone, joint and kidney infections.

### 4. Respiratory problems

Pneumonia is not uncommon and may be severe with an acute onset. Lung tumors are more common in older Guinea pigs. Guinea pigs with respiratory disease exhibit runny eyes and nose, weight loss, and difficulty breathing.

### 5. Reproductive and Urinary Problems

Sexual maturity arrives early in Guinea pigs, with females being able to breed at 4-6 weeks and males

at 9-10 weeks of age. Females should be bred prior to 6 months of age to prevent birthing complications. Signs of a pregnant Guinea pig in distress include: lethargy, depression, straining for more than 30 minutes, and bloody or greenish-brown vaginal discharge.

Urinary stones develop as a consequence of too much calcium in the diet (excessive alfalfa hay or an overabundance of pellets). A Guinea pig with stones may exhibit bloody urine, straining, and a hunched posture.

### 6. Obesity

Obesity is common in Guinea pigs and is due to improper diet (too many pellets or treats) and lack of exercise. Obesity can lead to lameness and sores on feet, inability to groom (urine and fecal accumulation), reproductive problems and GI stasis.

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## Recommended Veterinary Care

### Yearly Physical Exam:

- Dental examination
- Weight determination and nail trim
- Review diet and environmental dangers

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## Signs of Illness:

- Decreased or loss of appetite
- Poor hair coat
- Decreased or absence of stools or diarrhea
- Lameness
- Runny eyes and nose
- Excessive hiding
- Abnormal swellings on the jaw
- Weight loss

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## Useful Website

[www.guinealynx.com](http://www.guinealynx.com)



*Specialized Care for Avian & Exotic Pets*  
10882 Main St, Clarence, NY 14031  
ph (716) 759-0144 fax (716) 759-0146  
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