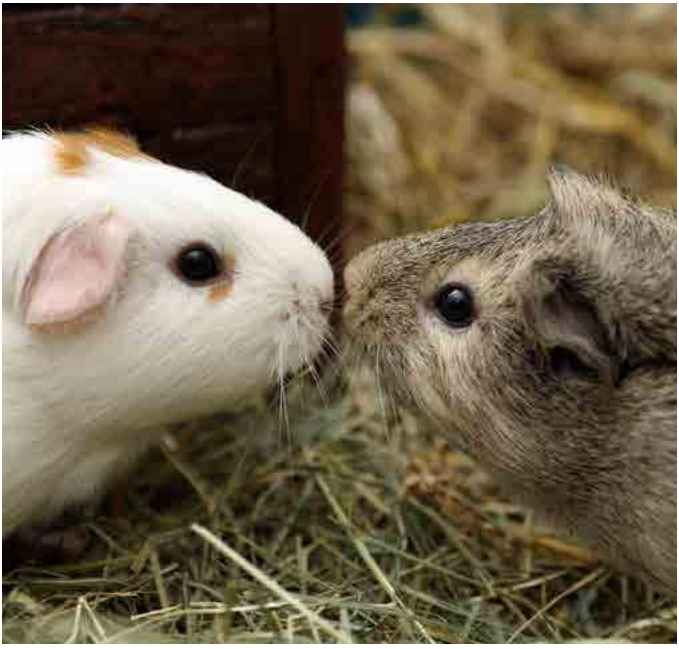
Caring for guinea pigs

YOUR GUIDE TO KEEPING GUINEA PIGS HEALTHY AND HAPPY



Animal Welfare Foundation
www.animalwelfarefoundation.org.uk

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession
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Owning any pet is not something to be taken lightly, no matter how big, small or expensive they might be.

All animals have needs which, as an owner, you have a legal duty to meet under the Animal Welfare Act* and guinea pigs are no exception.

Here you'll see how the five welfare needs of guinea pigs are the key to their happiness and health.

*The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland)Act 2006

Environment—the need for somewhere suitable to live

This may sound obvious but it is simply not enough to have a small hutch at the end of the garden with your guinea pigs crammed in like battery hens. To provide a living environment that will make your guinea pigs feel safe and comfortable, it's useful to think about the natural environment of their wild relatives.

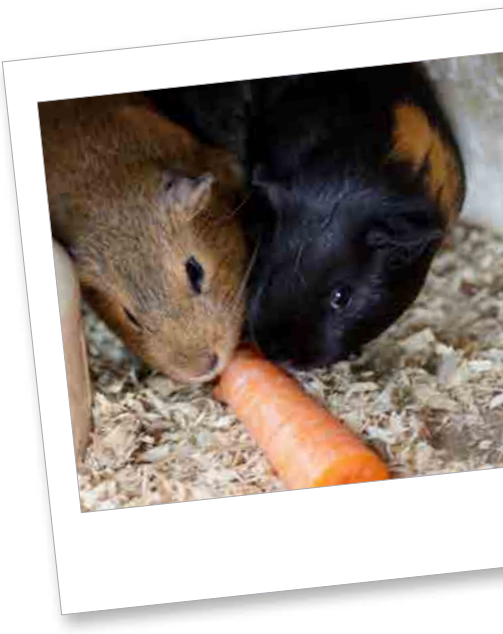
Guinea pigs are descended from animals called "cavies". Cavies live in grassland areas where there are either places to hide or burrows which have been dug by other animals. Cavies don't tend to dig their own burrows and prefer to make use of other animals' hard work! Both cavies and guinea pigs like to have access to grass or grazing and to always have somewhere to hide when they feel threatened.

Guinea pigs need a hutch and a run to give them a secure home and somewhere to exercise. These should both be as large as possible. There should be room for all of your guinea pigs to stretch out comfortably and move around freely. They need room to sleep together but also space to get away from each other if they want to.

The hutch should be sheltered from the worst of the weather, including being shaded from the sun. It should be waterproof, free of draughts and raised off the ground. The run should provide security from predators, have a shaded area and ideally be attached to the hutch so that your guinea pigs can exercise and graze whenever they choose. It should contain several hiding places, such as boxes and tubes.

Guinea pigs are sensitive to extremes of temperature so in winter the hutch and the run should be moved into a car-free garage or shed. It's important that they still have access to the run or another exercise area, even when indoors.

Line the hutch with wood shavings or shredded paper and provide good quality material for bedding, such as hay. Remove wet or dirty bedding daily and thoroughly clean the whole hutch weekly.



Diet—the need for a good diet and fresh water

Guinea pigs' wild relatives spend much of their time above ground eating grass and similar foods. Their teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and need to be worn down by long periods of grinding and chewing. Their guts have developed to digest these high levels of fibre through slow digestion.

Therefore the bulk of your guinea pigs' diet should be grass or good quality hay, which should be constantly available (day and night). You should also offer some fresh greens every day—around a teacup per guinea pig as a guide. Many are safe such as broccoli, cabbage and spinach but not all foods are OK and some garden plants like daffodils and foxgloves are also toxic. Talk to your vet about exactly which foods and plants are safe. Avoid offering fruits because they are high in sugars and can quickly make guinea pigs overweight if given too often.

Do not feed muesli-style dry food (a mix of seeds and flakes) because it can cause a lot of problems. Guinea pigs often pick out the bits they like and leave the rest, leading to an unbalanced diet and some guinea pigs may eat too much and become overweight. You should offer guinea pig nuggets alongside hay and greens, to avoid selective feeding but only give small amounts. It is very important you feed guinea pig nuggets, not food for other pets like rabbits. Guinea pigs can't make vitamin C and must get it from their diet. Guinea pig nuggets have added vitamin C which is essential but it can degrade over time so check the shelf-life of your food. Many vegetables are also high in vitamin C but to be safe you can add vitamin C to the drinking water to be sure they have plenty.

Guinea pigs, like rabbits, produce a soft form of poo which they eat straight from their bottom so that they have a second chance to get nutrition from their food. This is quite normal and essential for their health.

Make sure freshened water is always available daily. Use bowls or bottles and remember to check bottles for blockages or leaks.

Behaviour — the need to behave normally

This might sound like a plea from parents to children but it is a serious issue when it comes to animals. All animals have behaviours that they feel compelled to do, like dust bathing in chickens and grooming in cats. If animals can't do these things for one reason or another they can become bored, frustrated and can start behaving oddly due to stress. It's important to understand your pets' behavioural needs and guinea pigs are no exception.

Friends

Guinea pigs need the company of other guinea pigs (see Companionship) and shouldn't be kept alone. They love to groom each other and may spend a long time enjoying this social behaviour.

Hide-aways

Because guinea pigs are naturally prey animals they should always have somewhere to hide if they feel frightened or anxious. You can also make hide-aways fun by providing tubes and pots for them to explore and hide in.

Foraging and keeping busy

You can scatter the small amount of pellet food around so that your guinea pigs have to search for it, or loosely wrap some of their daily greens in brown paper so that they are kept occupied finding it. Provide suitable toys and objects like safe, untreated logs to keep them stimulated.

Companionship — the need for social contact with the right animals

Guinea pigs are very social animals which means they need contact with their own kind.

Keeping guinea pigs on their own causes loneliness, boredom and fear and is no longer seen as acceptable. With this in mind you need to consider from the outset whether you have the space, time and finances for two or more guinea pigs, not just one.

It is best to keep littermates of the same sex. This way you avoid the obvious problem of unwanted babies, but you will also reduce the chance of fighting.

Just because animals need social contact doesn't mean that they can be happy with just any other animal. For years people kept guinea pigs and rabbits together but this is NOT safe. These are very different animals and rabbits can seriously injure guinea pigs. Guinea pigs want guinea pigs as friends. Guinea pigs are also prey animals which means they will be fearful of many other animals like cats, dogs, foxes and birds of prey. You need to make sure that your guinea pigs can hide from and avoid such animals and be totally secure when they do tuck themselves out of sight. For this they'll need somewhere suitable to live.

Health — protection from illness and injury and providing treatment when needed

On the whole guinea pigs are very healthy pets when cared for correctly. You can prevent many diseases and avoid suffering for your guinea pigs by being informed and prepared.

Handling

Make sure you know how to handle your guinea pigs properly and always approach them quietly and gently, beginning when they are young. Start by offering them food from your hand that they like, so that they learn to associate you with nice things. Daily gentle handling will let them get used to you, reducing their stress, and also give you an opportunity to check their health.

Health checking

Guinea pigs can become ill very quickly so you need to check them every day for signs of problems. They don't always show obvious signs of illness so watch out for changes in behaviour. Drinking more or less than usual, changes in eating or just quiet, hunched behaviour can all be signs that your guinea pigs are unwell or unhappy.

Parasites

Guinea pigs can pick up parasites. The most common one is a mite which can cause intense itching and self-harm from the animals scratching themselves raw. If you notice scabs, hair loss or itching in any of your guinea pigs see your vet straight away.

Teeth

Guinea pigs' teeth can get too long, causing pain and abscesses. Signs of this can include going off their food, dribbling and weight loss; if you see any of these signs you should visit your vet without delay. Most cases of dental disease can be prevented by feeding a suitable diet (see Diet section). You can check the front teeth weekly by gently lifting their lip but only your vet can look at the back teeth so have them checked every few months or if you have any concerns.

Grooming

Long-haired guinea pigs should be gently groomed every day to prevent matted fur. Begin doing this gradually from a young age.

Vaccinations

Guinea pigs do not need any vaccinations.

Medicines

NEVER use other animals' medicines without advice because they can kill guinea pigs.

Ask your vet or vet nurse how to spot these and other problems and how to health check your guinea pigs so that you notice straight away when something is wrong.

Ask your vet

Animal Welfare Foundation

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