



# Milwood Animal Clinic

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## Guinea Pigs

There are quite a few sources of information available over the internet, some of which offer correct information. Others sources can be incorrect and harmful to your pet. Please consult with your veterinarian before making lifestyle, feeding, handling or caging changes.

***Small caged pets can be wonderful companions and learning experiences for children. However, young children should not be assigned full time caretaker duties. A missed meal or lack of water to drink can be life-threatening for small animals that must have a constant supply of food and hydration available to survive. Plan on supervising your children's care of their pet every day.***

### Natural History

It is very helpful in the understanding of exotic pet behavior, feeding, and care to know of the environments that the animals inhabit in the wild.

Despite its interesting common name, the guinea pig is neither from Guinea or related to pigs. The guinea pig (or cavy) is a docile rodent native to the Andes Mountain area of South America. They were first domesticated by the Andean Indians of Peru who used them as a food source and as a sacrificial offering to Incan gods. During the 16th century, Dutch explorers introduced guinea pigs to Europe where they were selectively bred by fanciers. Guinea Pigs as we know them as pets have been bred and domesticated over many years and do not exist in the wild; there are other species which are not domesticated that do live wild. In nature, guinea pigs are found on grassy plains, in small social groups. They move together, grazing on grasses. The teeth of a guinea pig grow constantly, and the chewing required by their natural diet of grasses prevents teeth overgrowth. They do not create burrows or nests, instead seeking out existing shelters in the environment. Wild guinea pigs are most active during dawn and dusk. Snakes, birds of prey and small mammals prey on these small rodents, so guinea pigs are very aware of their environment and potential dangers and depend on alarm squeals, hiding, and a quick escape to survive.



The guinea pig entered the research laboratory in the 18th century and has since made significant contributions to the scientific community. Through selective breeding efforts, guinea pigs are found in an array of colors and coat types from which to choose. To this day, the guinea pig remains a favorite pet among children and adults due to their friendly and docile behavior, ease of handling, and quiet nature.

## Guinea Pigs as Pets

Guinea pigs are very social, gentle and quiet little pets. They require a relatively small area to live in and should be kept in pairs or groups. They are very responsive to attention, and if taught to be held at an early age can be handled easily. They do frighten easily and are skittish if startled. In groups, individuals will scatter in all directions when frightened. Generally, they rarely bite or scratch. As with any small, fragile pet, children should handle only with close adult supervision to prevent harm to the guinea pig. Injuries from being dropped or stepped on are most common. Guinea pigs breed readily and due to some serious health issues related to this, amateur owners should avoid having their pets breed. They typically live an average of four to five years, but may live as long as eight years.<sup>1</sup>

While guinea pigs are generally quiet creatures, they do vocalize, making a variety of whistles, purrs, chatters and if alarmed, high pitched squeals.

Guinea pigs come in many coat lengths and colors, some of which do require grooming. Four primary varieties are commonly encountered in the pet industry. The Shorthair or English is characterized by having a uniformly short hair coat. The Abyssinian has whorls or rosettes in their short, rough, wiry coat. The Silky is a large variety distinguished by its medium length silky hair. The Peruvian is recognized by its very long silky hair, making grooming by the owner necessary. All types are commonly kept as pets.



### Handling

Your pet's natural curiosity and friendly disposition makes it fairly easy to handle. Most Guinea pigs will approach a hand introduced into their cage and can be easily scooped into the palm of the hand. Usually, cupping one hand under the rump while the other hand cradles the midsection is a good way to pick up guinea pigs safely. Two hands are recommended so that nothing is left dangling (they're larger than most of the other "pocket pets") and because there is less risk of dropping them. Guinea pigs are quite nose-heavy, and will do a potentially injurious nosedive if dropped. Guinea pigs that are not accustomed to being handled may jump and run, but rarely turn aggressive.

### Housing

Because of their social nature, domestic guinea pigs thrive in small groups of two or more. Groups of females or a neutered male with one or more females are commonly kept housed together. They are generally kept in cages, although some owners will provide an entire room for their pets to free roam. Caging is usually made of wire and should be longer rather than tall as guinea pigs are ground dwelling animals. If the bottom of the caging is also wire, it should be covered with a sufficient amount of paper based bedding to prevent your guinea pig's feet from resting directly on the wire. Exposed wire bottoms can cause irritation and infection of the feet as well as an entanglement risk.

Do not use aromatic bedding materials such as cedar or pine as they irritate the skin and can cause respiratory and liver damage to your pet. A paper based bedding is recommended. Care Fresh and Yesterday's News are easily found brands at pet stores. Replace soiled litter daily.

Be sure to inspect caging for any sharp points or areas that your pet may try to escape through. Household pets such as cats and dogs will consider a guinea pig prey so caging must be secure enough to keep them out as well. Dogs & cats should never be left alone with guinea pigs that are not safely caged.



Your guinea pigs will need a hiding house for each animal or one large enough for all to hide in. This is a very important stress reducer as they feel safe when they can hide from perceived danger. Easily cleaned plastic houses are available at most pet stores.

Guinea pigs are rather messy inside their cages. They have rapid metabolism and produce a fair amount of pellet sized stools and urine. Frequent cage cleaning is a must. They love to play, and will toss items such as light weight feeding bowls around with abandon. Fun to watch, but messy to clean up! Heavy food and water dishes are recommended as well as bottles that hang outside the cage as a backup to the water bowl. Bottles also prevent contamination of their drinking water as you pets romp and play in their enclosure.

The environment in the vicinity of the pet's cage is another important consideration. Because of their sensitive nature, guinea pigs are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement, and other such stresses. Also be sure to select a location away from direct sunlight and avoid cold damp areas. Guinea pigs thrive in a dry, cool environment with adequate ventilation. Drastic environmental changes should be prevented (especially high temperatures and humidity). Although guinea pigs are not nocturnal, they are most active at dawn and dusk and your pet will need quiet times during the day to sleep.

## **Play**

Guinea pigs are not jumpers and are poor climbers, but do enjoy environmental enrichment toys, hiding tubes, and safe chew toys such as untreated non-toxic wood toys made for them. Eating is very much on a guinea pig's mind most of the time and they enjoy treats and a variety of vegetables. Treats must be given in limited amounts as guinea pigs have a tendency to become obese if overfed. (More specific feeding guidelines are provided in the next section.). While if taught to accept holding when young, a guinea pig will tolerate it, but feels most secure when on solid ground and interacted with that way. They do enjoy gentle petting.

## **Nutrition**

Proper nutrition is important to all animals, and guinea pigs have their own, unique dietary requirements. If fed improperly, your pet is at risk of severe health problems.

Guinea pigs need a mixture of pellets, grass hay, fresh vegetables and nutritional supplements to maintain their health.

Unlike most mammals, guinea pigs cannot manufacture their own vitamin C. Therefore, they must receive it from an outside source or severe illness will result. Pelleted guinea pig diets are supplemented with this essential vitamin. However, even when properly stored in a cool, dry place, fresh pellets lose about one-half of the vitamin C content due to degradation within six weeks of manufacture. For this reason, we also recommend Natural Science Vitamin C Pellets



High quality guinea pig pellets formulated with vitamin C can be provided in a small heavy ceramic bowl. We recommend Oxbow brand pellets. Each guinea pig will eat approximately 1/8 cup of pellets daily when also fed adequate hay and fresh vegetables. Do not feed rabbit pellets as a substitute for guinea pig pellets. They are not equivalent in nutritional value. Rabbits and most other mammals do not have the requirements for added dietary vitamin C. Guinea pig diets are uniquely formulated with these requirements in mind, whereas rabbit pellets are not.

High quality grass hay needs to be provided at all times. Guinea pigs are natural grazers, eating almost constantly. Hay keeps their digestive tracts healthy, helps prevent obesity, and keeps their teeth from overgrowing - a common problem when they are fed diets without lots of hay. Over grown teeth cause painful spurs and malocclusions that will eventually cause your pet to stop eating and endanger its health. Pellets do not provide the grinding action on their teeth that hay does. Examples of grass hays are Western Timothy, Orchard Grass, and Oat Hay. Alfalfa is commonly found in pet stores, but it is not a true hay and contains excess of certain minerals that can cause health issues. It should only be fed to very young, pregnant or nursing guinea pigs.

A handful of dark leafy greens can be offered daily. Good choices are listed on the following page. Other fresh items that your pet may enjoy are carrot, tomato, and green or red pepper. Avoid iceberg lettuce as it has poor nutritional value and can cause loose stools. Avoid feeding fruits and sugar treats (e.g. yogurt drops sold at pet stores). All fresh items must be thoroughly washed to avoid exposing your pet to pesticide residues or bacterial contamination. Additions to your pet's diet should be made carefully. Any change in your pet's diet should be made gradually due to their sensitive digestive systems. Guinea pigs can also be quite fussy and refuse to eat new things, so always continue to provide their normal base diets when introducing new foods. Remove fresh foods that your pet does not in a timely fashion so prevent exposure to spoiled food.

## Nutritious Dark Leafy Greens

These vegetables are excellent food sources for many small animals including herbivorous and omnivorous reptiles, birds, rabbits, guinea pigs, and other herbivorous mammals.

### Feed the following greens in abundance:

Arugula  
Basil  
Cilantro  
Clover (no pesticides or herbicides)  
Dill leaves  
Endive\*  
Escarole  
Mint  
Peppermint leaves  
Radicchio  
Raspberry leaves  
Red or Green Leaf Lettuce  
Romaine lettuce (no iceberg or light colored leaf lettuce)\*  
Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides or herbicides)\*  
Watercress\*  
Wheat grass

### The following greens should be fed less often and in smaller amounts:

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts^  
Beet greens (tops)^\*  
Bok Choy†  
Brussels sprouts^†  
Carrot tops^\*  
Collard greens†^\*  
Kale†\*  
Mustard greens†^\*  
Parsley^\*  
Radish tops^  
Swiss Chard^  
Spinach †^\*  
Turnip Greens†^

\* Contains high amounts of Vitamin A, which is good for skin health

^ Contains high amounts of oxalates & may cause health problems if fed often. Use sparingly.

† Contains high amounts of goitrogens & may cause health problems if fed often. Use sparingly.

Guinea pigs tend to be creatures of habit: they often do not tolerate changes in the presentation of their food or water or changes in the taste, odor, texture, or form of the food itself. You should avoid making radical changes in the food or water containers as well. Any sudden change in routine can result in your pet refusing its food and water which can be disconcerting and ultimately dangerous.

Foods should be provided in heavy ceramic crocks that resist both tipping and chewing. The crocks should be high enough to keep bedding and fecal pellets out of the food but low enough for easy access by the animal.

Water is most easily made available by the use of a water bowl. Guinea pigs tend to contaminate and clog water bottles by chewing on the end of the sipper tube and 'backwashing' food particles into it. It is imperative that all food and water containers be cleaned and disinfected daily.

Additional note: Guinea pigs naturally supplement their diets by consuming some of their own feces. They do not consume their stools indiscriminately; only certain soft stools called cecotropes are eaten. This is completely normal and vital to the health of their digestive tract, recycling B vitamins, fiber and useful bacteria.

## **Health**

The most important ways to keep your guinea pig healthy is to follow the guidelines provided by your veterinarian regarding proper caging, handling and feeding of your pet. These things, combined with close daily observation, attention to detail and regular check ups with your veterinarian will help ensure that your pet enjoys a long healthy life.

Observe you pet daily for changes in behavior, activity level, eating habits, weight, and bowel habits. Having a pet that is comfortable with handling a great benefit so that it can be examined up close on a daily basis. Inspect fur, feet and toes, eyes, nose and mouth, ears and hind end cleanliness as you handle your pet.

If your guinea pig has a change in eating habits, especially lack of appetite, it could be signaling serious problems developing. Changed in stools, such as loosely formed bowel movements or a decrease in stool formation are also of concern.

*Report abnormalities or changes to your veterinarian right away. Guinea Pigs can become very ill very rapidly. Decreased energy, a loss of appetite and changes in bowel movements in such a small animal is a serious concern.*

## Guinea Pig Care – Review

- Descended from wild rodents native to South America
- Ground dwelling; natural grazers
- Travel in groups; most active at dawn and dusk
  
- Quiet, social and quite gentle
- Can be skittish and frighten easily
- Rarely bite or scratch
- Easily handled, but prefer the safety of the ground
  
- Thrive in groups of two or more. (females or neutered male with females)
- Caging should be fairly large, longer rather than tall
- Bedding should be paper based
- Need to have a hide box for each animal
- Frequent cage and food/water dish cleaning are very important
- Avoid extremes in temperatures and humidity
- Enjoy playing with toys
  
- Must be fed pellets formulated specially for guinea pigs as well as supplemental vitamin C
- Require high quality grass hay (not alfalfa) to be provided at all times
- Offer dark leafy greens daily (parsley, romaine, spinach)
- Other fresh vegetables and fruit may be offered
- Introduce new foods gradually
- Fresh water available at all times
  
- Observe daily for changes in eating, stools and activity
- Serious health issues can occur in females allowed to breed
- Seek veterinary care right away if any abnormalities are noticed
- Plan regular examinations with your veterinarian
- Enjoy your little furry buddy or buddies!

