



Caring For Your Guinea Pig



PETVET clinics are well-equipped, full-service, small animal veterinary practices providing comprehensive diagnostic, medical, surgical and dental care. We aim to offer quality service, giving your pet the maximum opportunity to lead a long and happy life.

ALL THE CARE YOUR PET NEEDS!



DID YOU KNOW?

Guinea pigs – or cavies, to give them their proper name – originate from South America. There are eight species but it is the “domestic cavy” that we keep as pets. They are very intelligent and friendly as long as they are handled correctly.

Guinea pigs can live for 4 – 8 years but some may live even longer. Males are known as boars and females are called sows. If you are looking to get a young guinea pig they should be at least 6 weeks old. If you buy from a pet shop make sure they have been kept in single-sex groups or you may end up with more than you wanted!

In order to satisfy the five basic welfare needs Guinea pigs need the following:

-  A suitable place to live
-  A healthy diet, including fresh, clean water
-  The ability to behave normally
-  Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
-  Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease

ENVIRONMENT

Guinea pigs are curious and like to see what's going on in their surroundings so they can be kept indoors or out. They do, however, have sensitive hearing so unless your home is quiet they may be happier outside.

They need a large, predator-proof wooden hutch and run with a separate sleeping area where they can retreat out of sight to get some peace and quiet. It should be out of direct sunlight, weatherproof and draught-proof as guinea pigs are vulnerable to all extremes of weather. Do not keep them in a garage used to keep vehicles as the fumes can be dangerous.

Your guinea pig will need enough bedding to keep it comfortable and warm. Soft straw can be used but has no nutritional value. Hay is the best bedding material as it makes up the largest component of their food. Never use fluffy bedding as it doesn't dissolve if eaten and can become wrapped around limbs and injure your guinea pig.

Their toilet area should be cleaned every day and their whole house weekly with non-toxic cleaning products. Environmental changes can be stressful for a guinea pig so it can be helpful to place some of the used bedding into the toilet area to keep familiar smells around.

DIET

Guinea pigs are herbivores, which means they feed exclusively on plants. As they are naturally grazing animals, it's important they have quality non-dusty hay to keep their digestive systems working. 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 cabbages are all good sources. Never give them 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. Avoid lawnmower clippings as these can seriously upset their digestive systems.

Put food in earthenware bowls which are hard to flip over, or stainless steel bowls which can be clipped to the front of the hutch. Growing, pregnant or nursing guinea pigs may need to eat a bit more. Ensure the bowl is empty before topping it up as this may encourage them not to eat enough grass or hay. Do not give guinea pigs rabbit food as they have different nutritional needs. Avoid muesli-style guinea pig foods as these encourage selective eating – they pick out the bits they like. This tends to lead to overweight guinea pigs with tooth and digestive problems due to an unbalanced diet.



Guinea pigs have continuously growing teeth. Their front teeth (incisors) are visible at the front. They also have cheek teeth (molars) further back in their mouth, which are also continuously growing. They are kept at the correct length by eating grass and hay which are both highly abrasive and help to wear down their teeth.

Your guinea pig needs fresh, clean drinking water at all times. Water is best supplied from a gravity bottle, and should be changed daily.

Watch for any changes in the amount your guinea pigs are eating and drinking each day. Also keep an eye on their toileting habits as changes can be the first sign your guinea pig is becoming ill. If you are unsure, call the team at PETVET and they will help you decide if your guinea pig needs a visit to the vet.

BEHAVIOUR

Guinea pigs can be a lot of fun as pets. They communicate vocally with different noises having different meanings. A cooing sound give reassurance while a squeak can be a warning – a sign that they can be frightened or anticipation that food is on the way!

Guinea pigs need company of their own kind. Never keep a guinea pig in the same hutch or run as a rabbit as they tend to get bullied and can be seriously injured. The best combination is a pair or small group of the same sex, although neutered males and females may get along. Neutering males helps prevent fighting as well as the more obvious prevention of unwanted offspring. Ensure they have space to get away from each other as even after they have established a “pecking order” sometimes a guinea pig can be bullied if they can’t get away.

Take the time to handle your guinea pig gently and regularly from a young age so that they learn to see you as a companion and friend. When picking them up it should be gently and firmly. If they feel secure held close to your body they are less likely to panic and struggle. It is especially important to have regular contact with guinea pigs housed on their own.

Guinea pigs are gentle animals and can make good children’s pets. Be aware that they are relatively long-lived so they might outlive a child’s interest. For this reason it is important that the adults in the household share the same interest. As with all small animals, an adult needs to be responsible for ensuring that the children provide the correct care and attention.

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.

Guinea pigs are not usually interested in toys but they can enjoy running in and out of cardboard boxes and running through tubes or pipes. You could also hide small amounts of food around the cage to keep them alert and active.

A guinea pig’s behaviour depends on his/her age, personality and past experiences. Any changes in behaviour should be noted as it may be the first sign of them becoming unwell. Chewing cage bars, over-grooming, altered feeding or toileting behaviour, playing with their water, sitting hunched and repeated circling of their enclosure can be signs of stress.

HEALTH AND WELFARE

Guinea pigs are not very good at showing you when they are in pain. Any change in their normal behaviour can be a sign that things are not quite right. They can be vulnerable to various infectious diseases and other illnesses, especially dental and skin disease. Feeding them the correct diet of grass and hay can help prevent a lot of health problems, especially dental and gut disease.

Front teeth should be checked regularly as these can grow quickly. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth. Whenever we see your guinea pig we will also check their cheek teeth as these are located further back in their mouth and can’t be seen without the use of special instruments. If a guinea pig’s teeth are misaligned they don’t wear down evenly and they can develop tooth spurs growing into their tongue and cheeks. These can be treated but require a general anaesthetic to address properly.



One of the most common problems in guinea pigs is bumble foot, a swollen foot due to a bacterial infection, often caused by dirty bedding. They are also prone to eye problems, hence the need for bedding to be dust-free. Skin problems are also common in guinea pigs, especially itchy skin due to mange (mites). This is readily treatable by the vets at PETVET but be aware several treatments are often required for all guinea pigs housed together in order to get on top of the problem.

Male guinea pigs should be neutered if they are housed with females. Be aware they can still successfully breed for up to 4 weeks after being neutered. Female guinea pigs reach sexual maturity at 4 – 5 weeks old and males at 8 – 9 weeks.

Long haired guinea pigs need to be groomed regularly to keep them in good condition as their coats can quickly become matted and uncomfortable.

In conclusion, guinea pigs make fun and entertaining pets and can live long, healthy lives when given the correct care and attention. If you have any questions about your guinea pig or are wondering if a guinea pig would make a good pet for you please don't hesitate to contact the team at PETVET and we will do our best to help.

NOTES

CLINIC LOCATIONS

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