

Caring for your guinea pig

How to keep pet guinea pigs healthy and happy



Notcutts

GARDEN INSPIRATION SINCE 1897

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Are guinea pigs right for me?

Guinea pigs (or caviae as they are sometimes known) make excellent pets for children as they tend to be quite docile, are very gentle and don't bite when handled. Guinea pigs are small and light enough for children to handle but this must always be done with adult supervision.

Guinea pigs originally come from South America and if looked after properly, can live up to 7 years.

They are social animals and are happiest kept in twos or small groups of guinea pigs. Ideally, they should be kept away from dogs and cats as they are vulnerable to attack.

Your guinea pigs will be completely dependent on you. They need affection and attention every day and will require regular and frequent opportunities to exercise.

Choosing a new pet guinea pig

When selecting your guinea pig, check these signs that he is healthy:

- Alert and interested in his surroundings
- Clean, dry nose
- Bright, clear eyes
- Dense, clean fur
- Healthy appetite and weight
- Clean, dry bottom
- Trimmed nails

The first few days

It is important that your guinea pig suffers minimal stress when being introduced to their new home. Their hutch should already be set up with bedding, water and food, ready for your guinea pig's arrival.

Your guinea pig will need a few days to settle into his new hutch before being handled.

Only let your guinea pig out of the hutch for a few minutes at first, increasing the time each day for a few days to begin with. Soon your guinea pig be able to go into his run.

Our pet centre team will advise you of the food that your guinea pig has been eating so you can settle them in with the food they are used to.

When handling your guinea pig for the first time, it's very important that you are gentle, as they are more delicate than they look. Guinea pigs will need taming and probably won't be easy to catch the first time you try to handle them. When handling, ensure that they cannot fall or hurt themselves as they are very fast and could escape.

Start by sliding your hand underneath your guinea pig's belly and gently cup him taking care not to squeeze. Give him support by cupping his behind with your other hand and lift him gently off the ground. Move slowly and bring him towards your chest keeping one hand on his back and the other hand supporting his bottom.

It is important to reduce stress as much as possible, particularly in the first two weeks of your guinea pig being in his new surroundings.

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Creating a happy home

Guinea pigs need a warm, dry home as they cannot cope with draughts, damp or extreme cold.

Their hutch will need to last 8 to 10 years so consider this purchase wisely. Wood will last longer than ply but may need re-staining to keep it weather-proof. Always check that the product used is suitable and will not harm your guinea pigs. The treatment will need to be totally dry before your guinea pig can enter.

It is best to buy the largest hutch you can, 4ft x 2ft x 2ft is adequate, but 5ft x 2ft x 2ft is ideal. A hutch will also need a large exercise run attached for daily access.

Their hutch should be raised off the ground which prevents damp and draughts. Choose a sheltered site away from driving rain and wind or the midday sun.

A waterproof roof with overhanging eaves will keep your guinea pig's hutch dry. A good hutch will also contain an enclosed sleeping area with plenty of living space.

When there is very cold weather, the hutch should be covered or brought into a shed or

garage. Bubble wrap or foam backed carpet can provide good additional insulation when draped over the hutch at night. You can also buy a special hutch cover if you prefer.

Line the hutch floor with an 8cm layer of woodchips. The sleeping compartment should have deeply piled soft bedding of hay or straw for your guinea pig's comfort.

Secure your guinea pigs in their hutch at night, where they will be safe from foxes and cats.

A healthy diet and treats

Guinea pigs need to be fed twice daily, preferably first thing in the morning and again in the early evening. Clean, fresh water should be available at all times.

A healthy, varied diet would be:

- A good quality guinea pig pelleted food (which prevents selective feeding).
- Both grass and good quality hay are vital to help your guinea pig's digestion and must be available at all times.
- Fresh, clean fruit and vegetables should be given on a regular basis because guinea pigs can't create their own vitamin C like many other animals do. Suitable fruit and veg would be: apples, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, kale, parsnip or spinach. Wild plants such as dandelion, plantain, chickweed and knapweed can also be offered (only if not taken from busy roadsides.) Ensure vitamin C rich romaine lettuce, spring greens and peppers are regularly included in the diet.

- A mineral lickstone provides essential salts and minerals and should be available at all times.
- A freshly sawn apple or pear branch placed in the run will allow gnawing to keep teeth healthy.

Treat them now and then with some blueberries, pears or strawberries.

Getting to know you

Always use both hands to lift your guinea pig with one hand under their bottom to support their weight and the other hand around the guinea pig's back.

Hold your guinea pig close to your body or sit down and put them on your lap so they feel secure.

Exercise your guinea pig needs

Grazing and exercise are important for guinea pigs, they shouldn't be left in the hutch all the time.

A run allows guinea pigs to graze securely and can be moved around the garden as the grass is eaten. This should never be put on grass which is frosty.

In winter, a playpen containing logs, hay, boxes, drainpipes and rock box can be made to give your guinea pig the exercise he needs.

Guinea pigs and other pets

Guinea pigs are social animals and must be kept together. Two or more female guinea pigs will usually live happily together, if they are raised together from an early age. Likewise, two males will usually co-habit happily if they are litter mates or have lived together from a young age.

As a general rule, guinea pigs are happiest when kept with other guinea pigs.

Guinea pigs and rabbits should not be kept together.

Guinea pigs gender

Please ask a member of our team to confirm the sex of your guinea pig before buying.

Potential health issues with guinea pigs

Diarrhoea

This can be caused by contaminated or frosted vegetables, or a sudden change in diet. Consult a vet if symptoms persist.

Constipation

Can be caused by lack of roughage or too dry a diet. Try feeding them more vegetables but consult a vet if symptoms persist.

Vitamin C deficiency

Weight loss, flaky skin, swollen joints and difficulty walking can be signs of Vitamin C deficiency. Try feeding more fruit and vegetables but consult a vet if symptoms persist.



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Ringworm

This is a fungal infection which causes bald patches. Consult a vet straight away, as ringworm can be passed to humans.

Mites

These may cause hair loss or itching, and skin inflammation. Treat with a suitable spot on product.

Stripping hair

This is often caused by a lack of grazing. Try feeding your guinea pig extra hay.

Overgrown teeth

Teeth are really important to your guinea pig's health so they must be checked regularly to ensure they are not overgrown. If unsure, have your guinea pig checked by a vet.

Heatstroke

As temperatures start to soar, pets kept in outdoor hutches can suffer from heatstroke. Make sure he has a large run with plenty of shady spots and a constant supply of fresh water. On particularly hot days, fill a large plastic bottle with iced water, wrap it in a towel, and place it in the hutch. Your guinea pig can then cool himself by resting against the bottle.

If you suspect heatstroke, immediately bring him into a cooler area and dampen him with a cool damp towel (like a face flannel), particularly over the head (be careful not to let him inhale any water). Contact your vet immediately.

Pet insurance for your guinea pigs

Guinea pigs can be insured under plans for small mammals, however, it may not be possible to find an insurance plan specifically tailored to guinea pigs.

Your new pet checklist

- Hutch and run
- Water bottle
- Woodflakes
- Mineral lickstone
- Hay
- Straw
- Dry food
- Food bowl
- Treat to nibble
- Vitamin supplement
- Cage disinfectant
- Plastic or cardboard tunnels
- Toys for guinea pigs



Help and further advice

If you have any questions about caring for your pet, our fully trained team are happy to help if they can, or advise on where to find more specialist information.

Whilst there is a wealth of information available online, only a professional will be able to correctly answer your query. If in doubt, call your local vet for an appointment.

It is against the law to release, or allow to escape, non-native animals or birds. If you have trouble caring for any animals contact our team for advice.



Share your experiences of your new pet with us on social media.



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