



**Animal Health  
Care Center**  
*of Hershey*

# GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs are docile rodents native to the Andes Mountains in South America. Their clean, gentle nature and ease of handling make them wonderful pets. It is important to understand that they are *not* just small dogs or cats, though. They have unique requirements for their care that many new owners are not aware of. Your guinea pig veterinarian will discuss how to properly care for your new pet and keep him or her healthy and happy!

## WHAT DO I FEED MY GUINEA PIG?

Proper nutrition is one of the most important aspects of your guinea pig's health. Unlike most mammals, guinea pigs cannot manufacture their own *vitamin C*. Supplemental vitamin C must be given daily to avoid *scurvy*, a serious medical disease. Oranges, select vegetables, and guinea pig vitamin C tablets can be given for this purpose.

Unlimited amounts of *grass hay* should be offered daily. Timothy hay is a good choice. Alfalfa is too high in calories and is usually avoided unless recommended by your veterinarian.

In addition, *fresh vegetables* should be offered. Collard greens, endive, dandelion greens, carrot tops, mustard greens, parsley, romaine lettuce, red or green leaf lettuce, watercress, basil, bok choy, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cilantro, clover, and radish tops are all good choices. Spinach, kale, tomatoes, parsley, and broccoli are good sources of vitamin C.

*Guinea pig pellets* are specifically formulated for guinea pigs and contain supplemental vitamin C (though not enough!) and folic acid. Feed a maximum of 1/8-1/4 cup of pellets/day.

High fiber fruits such as apples, blueberries, melon, papaya, and strawberries may be offered as *treats* in limited quantities. Avoid sugary treats, seeds or nuts, chocolate, cereals or grains, potatoes, bread, pasta, yogurt, ice cream, beans, peas, and candy.

Finally *fresh water* provided daily in either water bottles or sturdy crocks is essential. If using water bottles, make sure the sipper tubes do not become clogged. Remember to wash your dishes and water bottles at least weekly.

## WHERE SHOULD I KEEP MY GUINEA PIG?

You should *always* keep your guinea pig in a cage when he or she is not supervised. Cages should be sufficiently large, measuring at least 100 square inches per guinea pig. Wire cages provide more ventilation than solid structures. The cage floor should be solid or covered with plastic, newspapers or a thick layer of bedding to prevent sores on your guinea pig's feet. Appropriate bedding includes shredded newspaper, recycled newspaper pellets, or aspen shavings. Avoid cedar or pine shavings. Place your guinea pig's cage in a quiet area of the house. Avoid direct sunlight and cold drafts. The cage should be cleaned at least weekly.

Use your imagination to design your guinea pig's toys and cage furniture. Toilet paper rolls, Kleenex boxes, and plastic tubes make great toys. Provide your guinea pig with an area for hiding or sleeping.

Guinea pigs are very social and more than one guinea pig may be housed together.

Exercise is very important and should be allowed daily if possible. Your guinea pig should be supervised at all times when outside of his or her cage.

As with all animals, prevent access to electrical cords, frayed fabric or loose carpet that could be ingested, lead paint, houseplants, pesticides or cleaning products, tobacco and cigarette smoke, and unsupervised dogs, cats, or other predators.

## VETERINARY CARE

Guinea pigs do not require any vaccinations, but should have a physical examination performed annually by a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about guinea pigs. In older pets, blood work, urinalysis, and x-rays may be recommended.

If you are planning to house guinea pigs together, you may want to consider neutering the males to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Female guinea pigs have a high incidence of ovarian cysts, and spaying can prevent this problem.

Dental disease is very common in guinea pigs. Because their teeth grow continuously, they can become overgrown, causing sharp points, pain, drooling, and an inability to eat. A good oral exam may require anesthesia.

Guinea pigs hide signs of illness until they are very sick. It is important to contact a veterinarian *early* if you notice any of these signs:

Poor appetite	Abnormal stools	Overgrown teeth
Drooling	Tooth grinding	Difficulty eating
Lumps	Dandruff or flaky skin	Itchiness or hair loss
Difficulty urinating	Bleeding	Difficulty breathing
Sneezing or coughing	Discharge from nose/eyes	Listlessness
Weakness	Difficulty walking	Painful abdomen

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Average life span: 5-6 years.
- Humans (and other primates) are the other species that can not make their own vitamin C.
- Guinea pigs eat *cecotrophs*. These are special feces that contain essential nutrients.
- Some antibiotics are fatal to guinea pigs.
- Many guinea pigs who become pregnant after 6 months of age will need a C-section because the pelvis is too narrow to give birth naturally.
- Guinea pigs are very vocal—11 sounds have been described!