

Guinea Pigs – Feeding, Husbandry and Veterinary Care

Guinea pigs make great pets. They are an intelligent species, with each individual guinea pig having its own unique personality often bonding well with their owner. They are relatively easy to care for however there is some important information about feeding, husbandry and veterinary care that all guinea pig owners should know and understand. This care sheet will highlight these important points and share some handy tips about how to keep your guinea pig healthy.



Basic & Interesting Information:

The guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*), also known as a 'Cavy', is a member of the rodent family Caviidae. They generally live for an average of 4-6 years however some can live longer. There are many different coat types and colour variations available in Australia. An unusual thing about guinea pigs is that they have a different number of toes on their front feet when compared to their back feet, with four toes on the front and only three on the back. A normal, but somewhat unpleasant activity that guinea pigs partake in is called coprophagia, where they will eat their own faeces. This is a normal thing for a guinea pig to do and helps keep the good bacteria in their digestive tract healthy.



Female guinea pigs (also known as sows) have an oestrous cycle of about 15-17 days. They are generally prolific breeders and can get pregnant immediately after giving birth. An average guinea pig litter size is between 2-4 babies and the average gestation period of a guinea pig is between 63 – 72 days: a lot longer than rabbits, rats and mice. Unlike rabbits and many other rodents, baby guinea pigs (pups) are born fully furred with their eyes open and can walk within minutes of birth. Despite requiring their mothers milk for at least the first 3 weeks of life, guinea pig pups can eat solid food within hours of birth. Guinea pigs can reach sexual maturity as early as 4 weeks of age, and it is recommended to wean pups from their mother at this time. If young male guinea pigs (boars) are not separated from their mother or sisters by this time, accidental and unwanted pregnancies can occur. It is recommended that sows are not bred for the first time until they reach a good body size and an appropriate level of maturity, this normally occurs around 3 - 4 months of age. When a sow gives birth, the two halves of her pelvis separate to allow passage of the pups through the birth canal. When sows reach 4-12 months of age pelvic bone ossification can occur. This causes the joining of the two halves of the pelvis. Once fused together the pelvis is unable to separate which can lead to a range of birthing complications.





Choosing a Healthy Guinea Pig:

There are many different places where you can purchase your guinea pig. In Western Australia a good place to start is the Western Australian Guinea Pig Club – Cavy West. There are many reputable guinea pig breeders that are members of the club and are more than willing to help new guinea pig owners out. To get in contact with Cavy West, visit www.cavywest.com or search for them on Facebook.



Regardless of where you choose to buy your guinea pig from it is important that you give them a thorough examination before purchasing. Guinea pigs should have a healthy gleaming coat with no patches of missing fur, clear bright eyes, pink and moist gums, nice clean and even teeth, clean feet without sores, an active and curious disposition and have well formed faeces. It can require some skill to correctly identify the sex of a young guinea pig, therefore we

recommend buying from someone that has experience in determining the sex of young guinea pigs. If any problems are identified it may be best to consider having a guinea pig vet check up before purchasing your guinea pig.

General Keeping Recommendations:

Guinea pigs are thought of as a herd animal, and do enjoy the company of other guinea pigs. There is little difference between boars and sows as pets, however, it is important to keep in mind that two adult boars who are unfamiliar to each other will tend to fight one another if introduced suddenly. When introducing two boars together for the first time it is best to introduce either two young boars or a young boar with an older boar. Alternately, castration of one or both boars will usually help stop boars fighting.



Good husbandry is very important with guinea pigs, with many diseases being preventable with adequate care. Guinea pigs do well in a hutch that is either inside, or undercover and free from direct sunlight, rain and windy drafts. It is recommend that each guinea pig be provided with a minimum floor space of approximately 30 cm x 60 cm, however, the more room the better. Newspaper can be used to line the bottom of the hutch with a bedding substrate such as oaten or meadow hay, pine shavings or recycled paper kitty litter placed on top. To avoid a cage becoming too dirty or too smelly, bedding should be changed at

least weekly. Ammonia is produced in guinea pig urine and



guinea pigs are sensitive to high ammonia levels in the air. Keeping a hutch clean and tidy helps to keep ammonia levels down and avoid potential problems.

Waste from the hutch makes for great mulch and compost for your garden.





Guinea pigs love hidey holes, so enrichment can be provided by placing things such as hide away castles, plastic tunnels/pipes, cardboard houses and hay nests in your guinea pig's hutch. Enrichment can also be provided in the form of toys and may provide hours of entertainment for your guinea pig each day.

Guinea pigs are sensitive to the heat and may experience heat exhaustion when temperatures are in excess of 28°C. In some cases heat exhaustion can be very severe and can lead to death. It is important to keep your pet guinea pig cool on hot days, especially if they are living outside the house. Make sure to provide plenty of water, fruit and vegetables on hot days and ensure that the hutch has plenty of cool shady areas available throughout the day. Frozen water bottles can be provided as a cool object for your guinea pig to lay against on a hot day.



What to feed my Guinea Pig?

Guinea pigs require a diet high in fiber and protein, with some fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. Fiber is a critical part of a guinea pig's diet. Diets lacking fiber have been associated with gastrointestinal and dental diseases.

Guinea pigs are unable to produce and store Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) in their body hence Vitamin C is a dietary essential for a guinea pig and must be provided in the daily diet. Deficiencies of vitamin C can lead to a range of serious diseases.

It is important to provide a diet for your pet guinea pig that is high in protein, fiber and vitamin C. This can be achieved by providing a good quality guinea pig pellet or muesli at all times, plenty of good quality oaten, meadow or Lucerne hay or chaff and daily vegetables and fruits. Too much fruit in the diet can lead to gastrointestinal issues, and we recommend using fruits as treats only. Vegetables that are safe to feed and that contain high levels of Vitamin C include parsley, broccoli (stem and flower), kale, asian greens, capsicum, spinach and silver beat. Other vegetables such as beetroot and carrot may also be offered, but do contain lower levels of vitamin C. Iceburg lettuce and potato should be avoided as they may cause diarrhoea in your guinea pig. Guinea pigs absolutely love fresh grass. Providing time on the lawn either in a secure cage or whilst being supervised is a great way to provide grass to your pet.

It is important that your pet guinea pig has clean fresh water on offer at all times. This can be provided easily with a drinker bottle attached to the cage.





What do I need to take my Guinea Pig to the Vet for?

Guinea pigs require regular veterinary care and check ups. The following is a summary of what we recommend.

Annual check ups

We recommend annual health checks for guinea pigs. At this time your guinea pig will receive a thorough examination to help identify any problems that are occurring. Your guinea pig's teeth will also be checked at this point and advice on prevention and management of dental disease can be discussed. There are no vaccinations available for guinea pigs in Australia, and as such, guinea pigs do not require annual vaccinations.

Sterilisation

Neutering your guinea pig can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- Reducing the risk of fights occurring if you have more than one guinea pig
- Decreasing aggression between boars
- Prevents unwanted pregnancies
- Prevents development of ovarian cysts in females – a common reproductive disease in female guinea pigs.

We recommend sterilisation of all boars, however only recommend sterilisation of sows if problems arise. The reason for this is that the surgery to remove the reproductive tract of a female guinea pig carries a slightly higher risk than castration of males.

Summary

Guinea pigs make wonderful pets! By following the above advice you can help to reduce the chances of common problems occurring and can ensure that your guinea pig is receiving the care that it deserves. Unfortunately even with the best care problems can still occur and if you are at all concerned about your guinea pig please contact us to arrange an appointment. Things to watch out for include but are not limited to the following:

- Lethargy
- Diarrhoea
- Weak hind legs
- Hair loss
- Not eating or not drinking
- Dull eye colour or coat
- Squealing when urinating
- Dirty teeth
- Scratching excessively
- Water staining around mouth
- Weight loss
- Discharge from eyes and/or nostrils
- Lump Formation

