

## Guinea Pigs As Companion Animals

Guinea pigs are excellent companions for adults and supervised children. These small exotic pets from South America have gentle dispositions and friendly natures. Guinea pigs are vegetarians and usually have no instinct to bite the hand that feeds them. They are fairly delicate and prone to injury if handled roughly. As prey animals, they have a tendency to be fearful of sudden movements and loud noises. Other animals in the family must be watched and trained to accept pigs as family members as opposed to potential meals. Rabbits and guinea pigs often do very well together but must be introduced to one another slowly while supervised.

Although they are often considered “low maintenance” pets, guinea pigs still require daily care. Expect to spend about 15 minutes a day washing and distributing veggies, changing water, freshening the cage and giving hay. Cages need to be cleaned at least once or twice a week. Grooming should be done at least weekly, with long-haired pigs requiring more time spent on brushing.

When you pick a cage for your little friend you should pick one without a wire floor; plastic is the best and easiest to clean. There should be at least two square feet for living space per pig with sides at least 10 inches high. The best bedding is kiln dried pine, newspaper, corncob bedding, or hay. Do not use cedar shavings as they have fumes that can cause liver damage. The cage should be located in a draft free area and the bedding should be kept as dry as possible. Ideally the room temperature should be kept at 65 to 75 degrees. Guinea pigs are more susceptible to overly hot temperatures than to cold temperatures.

Guinea pigs should be fed a combination of commercial pellets, hay, and fresh fruit and vegetables. Guinea pigs require daily Vitamin C in order to stay healthy. Guinea pigs who are deprived of Vitamin C will develop scurvy in as little as two weeks. Commercial guinea pig diets are usually fortified with Vitamin C; however Vitamin C is easily deactivated over time so you should not rely on fortified diets as the only source of Vitamin C. Offer your pig fruits and vegetables high in Vitamin C (broccoli, carrots, cabbage, strawberries, etc.) daily. Fresh water should be provided at all times in a water bottle.

A guinea pig's placid external behavior can make it exceedingly difficult to recognize the first signs of a major illness. Guinea pigs have few defenses in nature, except for the ability to run fast and recognize danger from a predator early. In the wild, showing signs of illness would be an invitation to an early death, since the guinea pig's natural enemies will select the slowest or most attainable prey first. Therefore, guinea pigs have mastered the art of masking their illnesses. A responsible owner needs to understand this natural defense mechanism, and learn how to recognize the non-verbal cues your pet may be sending that would indicate a serious illness or condition.

Guinea pigs are prone to pneumonia and other respiratory problems, so check the area around their cage for drafts and cold spots. Wet bedding combined with cold air can trigger respiratory distress very easily, so try to eliminate both. If your guinea pig seems listless and hasn't been drinking nearly as much water as usual, check his nostrils for any

visible discharge. Any discharge from the nose is cause for concern. His eyes may be excessively watery, or they may appear dull and dry. Pneumonia is a major killer of guinea pigs, so you should call the clinic for an appointment at the first sign of respiratory problems.

Digestive problems are fairly common. Guinea pigs are never far from urinating or defecating, so any drastic change in this behavior should be taken seriously. Guinea pigs usually produce small, well-formed 'pellets' of feces, with little smell. They normally consume some of the darker feces, which serve as a source of vitamins. The sudden appearance of large, misshapen piles of feces, or the drastic reduction in the number of normal droppings is an indication of serious digestive problems.

A combination of less frequent urination and lower fluid intake is a sign of dehydration. Other signs of dehydration include a dry sunken eyes and tacky gums. If you haven't already, purchase a water bottle with marked gradations on the side. Monitor the daily water intake of your pet, and note any major deviations from the average. If you suspect your pig is dehydrated, call the clinic for an appointment.

If a guinea pig seems excessively disconnected from the things that normally excite him, such as feeding time or the touch of a familiar hand, then you may have a sick pig. Listlessness in a guinea pig is not a good sign at anytime and always warrants further investigation.

External parasites are common in guinea pigs. Pigs with lice or mite infestations typically are very itchy and lose hair. The skin is often crusty or flaky. Mites are too small to be seen without the aid of a microscope but lice can often be seen with the naked eye. Guinea pig nails grow quickly and should be trimmed on a regular basis. We would be happy to show you how to do this if you are unsure how to trim your pig's nails.