

Caring for Your Pet Guinea Pig

Caging and Bedding

- Guinea pig cages should have a flat bottom to prevent foot injuries and should be large enough for the guinea pig to run around in any direction.
- A hide box or igloo should be available for hiding.
- Bedding should be unscented, dye-free paper bedding. Avoid towels, carpet, or wood chips.

Food and Water

- About 80% of a guinea pig's diet should be high quality timothy hay. Hay should be available at all times.
- About 10% of your guinea pig's diet should consist of leafy greens. (*See recommended diet and greens below*)
- Guinea pigs, like humans, cannot synthesize their own Vitamin C and must get it from their diet. Water additives and fortified guinea pig diets are not reliable sources of Vitamin C, so we recommend feeding bell peppers daily to be sure that your guinea pig is getting the vitamins that he/she needs.
- Pellets should be plain, timothy-based pellets, with no seeds, nuts, or dried fruit. Pellets should be measured and guinea pigs should get about 1-2 tablespoons per day. If your guinea pig is overweight, your veterinarian may recommend discontinuing pellets altogether.
- Fresh water should always be available in a bottle and changed daily.

Activity and Enrichment

- Guinea pigs enjoy playing with and chewing on toys, but it is important that they are made out of safe materials. Cardboard boxes, such as empty cereal and granola bar boxes make great toys (especially if you stuff them with hay!). Many guinea pigs enjoy grass huts and tunnels available in pet stores and on the internet.
- Your guinea pigs may also enjoy natural wood blocks or branches to chew on. Be sure to obtain them from a source that doesn't use pesticides.

Veterinary Care

- Young guinea pigs should have yearly veterinary exams to evaluate their overall health and well-being. Older guinea pigs or those with known health problems may need to be seen more frequently.
- Spaying and neutering guinea pigs may be recommended under some circumstances. Please discuss your individual situation with your veterinarian. Dystocia (problems during delivery) is very common in guinea pigs, so we don't recommend that inexperienced owners breed their guinea pigs.
- Some guinea pigs require regular dental care. Your veterinarian should always evaluate your guinea pig's dental health at your visit.
- Guinea pigs can carry ringworm, which is contagious to people, so have your guinea pig evaluated by a veterinarian if you notice areas of hair loss.
- Signs that your guinea pig is sick include decreased appetite, decreased fecal output, small/dry fecal balls, lethargy, sneezing or nasal discharge, excessive salivation, sores on the feet, or abnormal urination. Guinea pigs are very good at hiding signs of illness until they are very sick, so please contact your veterinarian right away if you have any indication that your guinea pig may be sick. Not eating for more than 12 hours is an emergency.

Guinea Pig Diet

Guinea pigs are herbivores, meaning they eat only plant material. Herbivores must have food moving constantly through their digestive system to avoid health problems. They require a high fiber, low carbohydrate and low fat diet. Guinea pigs require a dietary source of vitamin C to avoid serious health problems. Just like people, they are unable to make their own vitamin C and require an outside source.

Our recommendations for a balanced guinea pig diet are:

80% hay: A variety of grass hays should be offered to your guinea pig and hay should always be available. The most common grass hays available in pet stores are timothy and orchard grass. Alfalfa hay contains too much calcium and protein for an adult animal and should only be fed to young guinea pigs (<6 months) and lactating females.

10% pellet diet: For adult guinea pigs, we recommend a timothy-based pellet without added fruits, nuts, or seeds, such as Oxbow's Cavy Cuisine. Most adult guinea pigs do well with 1-2 tbsp/day, but your veterinarian may recommend increasing or decreasing the amount, depending on your guinea pig's weight. We recommend feeding your guinea pig a measured amount of pellets every day so that you will notice as soon as possible if your guinea pig's appetite has decreased.

10% leafy greens: We recommend offering your guinea pig a daily salad that consists of leafy greens and herbs. Some types of greens should only be offered in limited quantities (see provided greens list for more information).

Vitamin C: We recommend that most guinea pigs get their Vitamin C from bell peppers, which are high in Vitamin C and low in sugar. Red and yellow peppers have the most Vitamin C, but green peppers have a lot too. One to two tablespoons of pepper per day should be adequate for most guinea pigs. We do not recommend oranges as a source of Vitamin C because they are high in sugar and actually have less Vitamin C than peppers!

We do not recommend Vitamin C supplements that are added to water because Vitamin C is light-sensitive and degrades very quickly when placed in the water. While your guinea pig's pellets are probably fortified with Vitamin C, we don't recommend relying on them as the primary source of Vitamin C, as the Vitamin C in the pellets breaks down very quickly over the first few months after the pellets are manufactured.

Treats: The guinea pig gastrointestinal system is not designed to handle foods that are high in fat or sugar. We do not recommend feeding yogurt drops or other commercial guinea pig treats that are high in sugar. Breads and cereals should also be avoided. Good treats for guinea pigs include a small piece of cucumber or bell pepper. Your guinea pig can have carrots and fruits, but only in very small quantities (~1/2" piece a few times a week).

Greens

Greens are a very important part of your pet guinea pig's diet. They provide important nutrients, increase water intake, and help provide interesting variety in your pet's diet. We generally recommend feeding about ½ cup of greens per two pounds bodyweight daily. If your pet is not accustomed to eating greens, you should introduce them slowly to prevent diarrhea.

Recently, there has been a lot of interest in the role that the mineral content of greens plays in the development of urinary tract disease in small mammals. The focus has been primarily on calcium and oxalates, since these are the common components of urinary stones in small mammals. In general, we recommend feeding greens that are lower in calcium and oxalates as the basis of your pet's salad and rotating through the higher calcium/oxalate greens in smaller quantities, unless otherwise directed by your veterinarian. The calcium and oxalate contents of common greens are listed below. If your pet has a history of urinary problems, consider misting the greens with water before serving to increase water intake.

Vegetable	Calcium ¹	Oxalate ²
Arugula	Low	Low
Basil	Low	Moderate
Beet Greens	Low	High
Bibb/Boston Lettuce	Very low	Very low
Bok Choy	Moderate	Low
Cilantro	Very low	Very low
Collards	Moderate	Low
Curly Endive	Low	Medium
Dandelion Greens	Very high	High
Dill	Very low	Low
Green Leaf Lettuce	Very low	Very low
Kale	Moderate	Moderate
Mustard Greens	Moderate	Low
Mustard Spinach	Extremely high	Very high
Parsley	High	Moderate
Radicchio	Very low	Low
Red Leaf Lettuce	Very low	Very low
Romaine	Very low	Very low
Spinach	Low	Very high
Swiss Chard	Very low	Very high
Turnip Greens	Very high	Low
Watercress	Low	Low

¹ Compiled from nutritiondata.com

² Compiled from lowoxalateinfo.com



Information provided by NC State Veterinary Hospital Exotic Animal Medicine Department. For more, visit www.ncstatevets.org/exoticanimal/.