

# Guinea Pig Care



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## Wee Companions Philosophy

Our mission is to rescue guinea pigs, rats, hamsters, and other small exotic mammals from shelters, places of abandonment, and from persons relinquishing their pets. Whenever possible, we offer a safe house to these animals, irrespective of age, temperament, or health status. These animals will receive veterinary care and socialization in the hopes that they will be placed in a "forever" home. Animals given Sanctuary Status will be placed in our Foster Care Network to live out their lives in comfort and with love. We are also focused on educating foster parents, school children and others on the care, feeding and prevention of unwanted litters of these animals.

## **Are You the Right Home for a Guinea Pig?**

Taking on a guinea pig as a pet requires a serious commitment. The following questions should be raised and discussed to consider one's readiness for bringing a guinea pig into your life.

1. Who will be the main caretaker of the guinea pig?  
No child or young teen can take full responsibility for the full care of a guinea pig. Young caretakers need to be educated, supervised and praised for a job well done by a responsible adult. An adult must ultimately make sure the guinea pig is treated humanely and will carry the financial responsibility for supplies and vet care when it is needed. Young children must be supervised when handling a guinea pig at all times, a busy adult who cannot give that kind of attention cannot be fully responsible for its safety
2. Are you prepared for a 9 year commitment?  
With good diet and care guinea pigs can live up to 9 years old. This time span will extend through high school, through sports meetings, artistic performances and possibly college. Will there be time in a growing child's schedule to continue to care for their guinea pig?
3. Guinea pigs are considered exotic animals.  
Although they do not require vaccinations guinea pigs will require specialist care from an exotic vet. Examinations may cost between \$40 and \$50 dollars without tests or medications. Consideration needs to be made for access to an exotic vet, especially in emergencies.
4. Does anyone in the family have allergies?  
Some people are allergic to guinea pigs, especially children that already have reactive airways disease. As well as respiratory symptoms people can develop hives (itchy bumps on the skin) when handling a guinea pig. Guinea pigs have to eat large amounts of hay daily for their health; many people are allergic to grasses and therefore hays.
5. Do you have the room to accommodate a guinea pig?  
6 or 7 square feet is considered a reasonable size for a guinea pig's living area with an extra 2 feet square for each additional guinea pig. Carefully consider location and your guinea pigs safety when deciding on housing options
6. How will your other pets be affected by the new guinea pig?  
Most pets will be curious about the new comer and will want to meet them. Certain dogs and dog breeds will be very excited to hear the loud wheeks a guinea pig can make and their movement may stimulate their prey drive. Dogs and cats must be strictly supervised and every effort must be made to ensure the guinea pigs safety.
7. Are you allowed to have guinea pigs in your rented accommodation or do you have permission from the other household occupants?  
Even small caged animals may not be allowed in certain rental properties. Always check with your land lord prior to getting your guinea pig.

## **Before you Adopt a Guinea Pig ...**

1. Which adults in the family will be the primary caretakers?
2. Does everyone in your family want a guinea pig?
3. Guinea pigs are considered exotic animals and their veterinary care is expensive, bills can easily reach hundreds of dollars. Are you prepared to provide this level of care, should it be necessary for your guinea pigs?
4. Is anyone in your home allergic to guinea pigs or hay?
5. Do you have an appropriate cage and supplies?
6. Do you have animals that could endanger the guinea pigs?
7. Will you be able to supervise any children around these guinea pigs?
8. Have you had guinea pigs before? Where are they now?

9. Are you allowed to have guinea pigs in your house / apartment?
10. If you move, get married, have a baby or if the kids lose interest, are you prepared to keep your guinea pigs?

## **Housing your Guinea Pig**

There are many options to house your single or herd of guinea pigs. From a confined space to “free range” priority must always be given to safety, space of the area and cavy comfort. A stimulating environment and ease of cleaning for human slaves comes in as a close second!. Whether hand built or store sold the above considerations are the same.

### **Inside Options**

To have a free range animal requires vigilant safety standards. No rocking chairs, heavy furniture that a guinea pig can become stuck under, no exposed electrical wires or busy areas with excited children or other pets rushing through is going to lead to a stress free life for your guinea pig. Doors must be kept secured. Even if your guinea pig is free range he needs his own space to retreat and rest, feed and get water. This needs to be a very safe corner!

If housed and not free range a central position in the home is preferred. A position at the center of family life means the guinea pig will get lots of check ins and thrive on the frequent contact. There should always be a main caretaker though incase everyone thinks someone else is taking care of the pet and he ends up being neglected. The living area must be away from windows, or at least direct sunlight and draughts. Dark corners or closets are not recommended. It is not recommended that guinea pigs be housed in young children bedrooms for not parental supervision is available at all times.

Guinea pigs should be offered the largest area possible that everyone can live with. It is recommended to have 7 square feet per guinea pig with the additional 2 feet per additional guinea pig. Males need a lot of room, more so than females, so each additional male should be offered an extra 4 square feet.

Visit: [www.cavycages.com](http://www.cavycages.com) and [Guineapigcages.com](http://Guineapigcages.com) for examples and ideas for excellent cages.

It is recommended to have cages at a workable height, maybe set up on a table. With no other animals in the house, the cages can be open at the top which is beneficial for “hard to catch” guineas. Aquariums are not suitable as living areas since they lack enough ventilation for guinea pigs. Flat bottomed cages are a must to prevent problems with feet and toes and a high sided (6 inches) bottom to a cage keeps the bedding inside the area when the guineas runs around his area.

Hay racks will keep nutritious hay off the ground and clean. Water bottles are more hygienic than bowls which will quickly become contaminated. Have at least two bottles for one pig and then increase bottle numbers in case of leakage or dominance issues over the water bottle! Change water daily lean bottle weekly with bottle brush, trumpet brushes can be used for the spouts.

Ramps offer a different view and a getaway place to go after squabbles. Having food on an upper level encourages more lazy guineas to exercise to get their food! They must not be open to prevent falls off the ramps.

### **Outside Options**

Whether outside permanently or for limited exercise time only there are very serious concerns for your guinea pig’s safety and quality of life. Any animal that is housed outside is never a full member of the family. The pet will go many hours without being visualized and since they are low on the food chain

guinea pigs hide ill health well. A few minutes to pass out veggies in the morning may not be enough time to realize that your guinea is not eating normally or acting like its usual self. Living outside leaves your pet more susceptible to weather extremes and most importantly predators. Warm climates can be deceptive, days can start cool but by lunch time have reached extreme high temperatures (over 80 degrees) while to family is away from the home. Such extremes can lead to heat exhaustion, seizures and death.

Although outside pens can offer larger living areas than inside a hungry determined predator can get through weak door locks or dig under fences. Pens must also be covered to protect the guinea pigs from birds of prey. Lighting is poor at night which will dissuade evening visitors to check on your pets.

Permanent living areas or exercise pens must offer shelter from the elements of sun, wind, damp and cold. Shade and rain protection must be built into the cover and edges need to be secure so predators cannot dig into the pen.

### **Bedding and Cleaning**

Frequency of cleaning depends on the size of the living area, sensitivity to aromas and allergies. Cedar is toxic to small animals and should never be used. If using woods we recommend hard woods such as Aspen or recycled paper pulp products. Corncob can be prone to mold so should be avoided Some like to use fleece to line their cages covering towels, combining this with litter boxes close to the hay racks! Spot cleaning can work on a daily or every other day basis but a full clean needs to be done weekly and disinfecting can be done with diluted bleach or white vinegar.

### **Play Boxes for inside pigs**

Play boxes can be home built and offer your caged guinea pigs a daily adventure. They can house tunnels, hidey holes, and flat stones for the guinea to perch on, amusing toys, rolling toys for the guinea pig to push about and hidden treats to be found and consumed. If they can be built to be folded away after use they are more convenient for small spaces. Guinea pigs love them and many happy hours can be spent watching your guinea pig explore and enjoy his play time.

The more you interact with your pet the more he will respond to you and the relationship will be more enriching for all.

## **Guinea Pig Dietary Needs**

Guinea pigs are herbivores and crepuscular (more active in the mornings and evenings). Most naturally guinea pigs spend most of their waking hours foraging for food. It is pretty rare to have an obese guinea pig unless he is kept in a small, dull environment and certainly overweight rather than underweight is preferable in case of illness, however 2 ½ to 3 1/2 pounds is the average weight for an adult guinea pig.

### **Hay**

A Guinea pig's diet should consist of 75% to 80% fresh green grass hay (Timothy, Orchard or Bluegrass). Hay is essential to keep the teeth ground down and the digestive track moving well. If there are any signs of mold on the hay, discard immediately. Sharp stalks should be cut short or removed due to potential eye injury and this is also why guineas should not be housed on straw. Straw is not for eating. A variety of hay makes life interesting for the guinea pig so a mix is recommended. Hay must be unlimited and it is recommended to keep in a hay rack to keep off bedding and therefore clean. Alfalfa is for guinea pigs under 6 months, pregnant or nursing sows or sick guineas to tempt an appetite. Alfalfa is too rich in calcium to be a main part of a guinea pig's diet and can lead to bladder stones in the older guinea pig but as a small treat or supplement it is well devoured. All hay should be stored in a dry, cool, dark place.

## **Pellets**

If you do choose to feed pellets purchase a high quality, green, dye free plain pellet without any tempting seeds or additions. They should be formulated with Vitamin C and bought in small quantities to ensure freshness. They should be stored in a dry, cool, dark place and it is recommended to give 1/8<sup>th</sup> cup per day per pig. Timothy based pellets are designed for guinea pigs 6 months older, alfalfa based pellets are for those 6 months and younger and pregnant or nursing sows. Serving pellets in a heavy ceramic bowl will prevent the guinea pig upsetting the bowl.

## **Water**

Fresh water should be served at least daily, twice daily in hot climates. Guinea pigs will drink more if the water is cool and fresh. No additives are needed in the water to affect taste. Bottles are the preferred mode of delivery for hygiene reasons; however the bottles and the spouts need to be cleaned at least weekly to prevent build up. A bottle brush for the bottle and a small trumpet brush for the spout are recommended.

## **Vitamin C**

Guinea pigs need 25 mgs of Vitamin C daily and sometimes up to 100 mgs, depending on health, pregnancy and stress levels for some animals. It is not recommended to give Vitamin C in the water bottle. Vitamin C can deteriorate this way, the pig rarely drinks all of its water daily and in some cases it can dissuade the guinea pig from drinking because it affects the taste of the water which is not a good thing! It is recommended to give fresh Vitamin C veggies daily, this is the most enjoyable way to receive the levels of Vitamin C the guinea pigs needs. However a chewable tablet (100 mgs) broken into quarters will suffice to be eaten with pellets or given orally. Liquid Vitamin C can also be syringed into the mouth or given by dropper.

## **Vegetables**

Most guinea pigs will eat more enthusiastically in the mornings and late afternoons. A variety of fresh green and Vitamin C rich veggies is recommended daily. They must be washed prior to being given and any unconsumed veggies must be removed from the cage by end of day. The darker the greens, the more nutritious. It is recommended that a guinea pig receive 1 cup of veggies per day, this can be broken up into two servings. Mineral or salt licks along with multivitamin drops should not be necessary.

Forbidden foods include: Animal or dairy, meats, rabbit pellets, chocolate, dried fruit, avocado, potatoes, onions, raw beans, nuts and seeds.

Avoid or limit foods or that contain: beet pulp, corn products, rice or bran flour, vegetable fiber...these are fillers. Iceberg lettuce contains no nutritional benefits. Avoid foods that contain sweeteners, corn syrup, sucrose, molasses or artificial coloring or preservative.

Some examples of healthy guinea pigs foods: Parsley, cilantro, endive, Romaine lettuce , kale, brussel sprouts, spinach, wheat grass, clover, dandelion, broccoli leaves, asparagus, tomatoes, orange slices, kiwi fruit, raspberries, strawberries, blackberries, grapes, green or red pepper, cantaloupe, corn husks, banana slice, papaya slice, pineapple slice or mango slice, water melon.

## **Toys for guinea pigs**

Rotating a variety of safe fun toys will keep your guinea pig entertained, stimulated and exercised. Your guinea pigs enjoyment will also reward you as you watch him enjoy his toys!

Depending on the size of your guinea pig's living area or yours for that matter the creation of a play box may be considered. It should be big enough to encourage running, may have different levels and filled with safe toys for your pet. Play time in this kind of play box set up should be daily and keeping to the

same time helps your guinea pig know what to expect. If your guinea pig's living area is large so no play box is needed toys can be rotated through on a weekly basis.

### **Hidey Holes**

Wooden or plastic, untreated sea grass or hay "hide outs" can be positioned where ever but corners make an ideal spot. Guinea pigs love to go "under cover" during play time. Wooden houses can serve a double purpose as a chew toy but are not as easily sterilized as plastic. Houses made of tasty hay will quickly be devoured but will be thoroughly enjoyed during the process. Hiding spots can also be created with bricks and small flat boulders. Children's wooden building blocks can build an amusing short term house (watch for nibble marks!).

Cardboard boxes turned upside down or shoeboxes with doorways and windows cut into them can be an amusing toy for guineas and humans alike. Soda boxes or oatmeal containers also offer some variety. Flower pots placed on their sides, large PVC drainage pipes can also be offered. Fabric tunnels are also popular and "crinkle" tunnels usually sold as cat toys can make an amusing hidey or run through toy for some brave guineas.

Paper bags can bring hours of amusement and can double as a hay storage area when packed with tasty hay.

### **Chew Toys**

Some guinea pigs will flatly refuse to chew on a toy purchased for that purpose, but offering such is a good addition to the plentiful hay that your guinea is consuming daily. Logs or sticks that are dry and untreated from Apple or pear trees can be a safe an interesting chew toy. Gourds, cholla wood as well as coconut shells can arouse your guineas curiosity. A variety of hays offers the best kind of teeth file and presenting it in different ways can encourage consumption. Cardboard rolls stuffed with hay or hanging hay balls (sometimes with bells beneath it which some guineas love to ring!) keeps the hay clean and can be restocked easily.

### **Other Toys**

Light weight plastic, wicker/dried grass or wire balls with bells inside (not the light weight cat type balls in which a guinea may catch his teeth or feet) make an excellent toy for the guinea to push around with his nose. Guinea pigs do not use their "paws" like cats but use their noses and teeth to push, knock or throw toys about. Plastic baby rattles, measuring spoons collected from the kitchen or jar tops hooked together make easy fun toys. Crumpled pieces of paper or a sheet of newspaper (check all staples are removed) that the guinea can hide beneath can bring a few hours of cheap entertainment. Plastic toys that have a rounded bottom so they can be knocked over as well (bell included preferably) and be stuffed with treats makes a good purchase. Light weight towels or fleece (fringed makes added fun!) pinned to a corner makes a fun hidden spot an some guinea pigs simply love to run through the curtain. Some guineas become attached to stuffed toys and enjoy pushing them around as well as snuggling with.

### **Additional considerations**

Mirrors can be placed inside the cage. Cuddly beds made from fleece can be loved for a snuggle spot. Material sleeping bags or sacks can be made or purchased and some guineas simply adore them. Low slung hammocks can make a interesting toy.

**Never place a guinea pig in a rolling ball, even the largest size or encourage a guinea pig to use a wheel, their backs are simply not designed for such toys, much more fun is found safely running on a flat surface. Always consider the safety of your toys.**

## Checklist of Supplies for Guinea Pigs

- Water bottle
- Small heavy ceramic bowl for pellets
- Large cage – see Housing for particulars
- Toys – Igloo, plastic toys that your pig can throw around
- Safe litter – such as aspen shavings, Carefresh, Tek Fresh, Yesterday's News, Back2Nature.
- Food – Plain dye-free high quality guinea pig pellets. Unlimited high quality, grass hay (timothy, orchard grass and bluegrass.
- Vitamin C
- Veterinarian – It's important you have a vet that has experience with guinea pigs. Just like any animals, guinea pigs will eventually need vet care, and getting one now before you need a vet later is a good idea

## Resources

[www.guinealynx.com](http://www.guinealynx.com)

A great source of information. There is also a forum full of knowledgeable people willing to answer questions.

[www.cavycages.com](http://www.cavycages.com)

Directions for building your own cage using storage cubes and corrugated plastic.