

# Care of Pet Guinea Pigs

The guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*) is a docile rodent native to South America. Guinea pigs are lively, lovable pets that require relatively easy care. The most common types of guinea pigs are the English or American Shorthair, the Peruvian (long-haired), and the Abyssinian (swirled hair). The average weight of a guinea pig ranges from 500 to 900 grams (1 to 2 pounds). The average lifespan of a guinea pig is 5 to 7 years.

## HOUSING

The cage you choose should be large enough for your guinea pig to move around comfortably and still accommodate a hide box. The sides of the cage do not need to be especially tall since guinea pigs do not jump very high. Any cage should provide adequate ventilation, therefore aquarium tanks are not recommended for guinea pigs. Avoid wood flooring which allows urine to soak in and is difficult to clean. A commercially available cage with a plastic bottom and a removable wire top is a good choice. Avoid aspen or pine wood chips when choosing bedding, because they can contain harmful oils. Safer alternatives include recycled paper bedding or aspen. Any bedding should be changed frequently. Your guinea pig should be exercised outside of its cage with supervision on a daily basis for exercise. If not, he may need to be housed in a substantially larger cage. Make sure any wires or other chewable items are out of your pig's reach.

Guinea pigs are very social animals and are usually content around other guinea pigs, although this may mean they will be less bonded to their human family. Pigs of the same sex usually get along best give appropriate cage space. Males and females may be housed together if at least one of them has been neutered to prevent pregnancy.

## DIET

Your guinea pig's diet should consist of grass hay available at all times, small amounts of pellets (i.e. 1/4 cup per adult pig), and fresh vegetables. Alfalfa hay should be avoided if possible due to its higher protein and calcium content. High dietary calcium may predispose your guinea pig to the formation of urinary stones. Offer only plain pellets—avoid the kind with nuts or dried fruit, which are too high in fat for your guinea pig.

Guinea pigs are unable to make vitamin C, so they need to be given vitamin C to avoid serious health problems. Pellets made for guinea pigs include vitamin C, but the vitamin breaks down quickly on the shelf and becomes ineffective. Your pig should be given vitamin C-rich vegetables (see attached table). A less ideal way to provide vitamin C is through supplementation: give your guinea pig 60 mg of vitamin C daily. Liquid vitamin C supplements are available at pharmacies and health food store. Be sure when choosing a vitamin that it contains only vitamin C. Oversupplementation of other vitamins can cause serious health problems in your guinea pig. It is best to give the vitamin C supplement to your pig directly rather than putting it in the water source where it is rapidly degraded.

### Vitamin C

The following chart shows the vitamin C content in 1 cup portions of selected foods

Turnip greens	260 mg
Mustard greens	252 mg
Dandelion greens	200 mg

Kale	192 mg
Brussel sprouts	173 mg
Collard greens	140 mg
Parsley	140 mg
Guavas	125 mg
Broccoli leaf*	120 mg
Beet greens	100 mg
Cauliflower	100 mg
Kohlrabi	100 mg
Strawberries	100 mg
Honeydew melon	90 mg
Broccoli florets*	87 mg
Spinach	60 mg
Raspberries	60 mg
Rutabaga	52 mg
Cabbage	50 mg
Orange	50 mg

\*Broccoli stem has 0 mg of vitamin C.

Introduce food items one at a time and initially offer only a small amount to ensure there are no ill effects on appetite or eliminations.

### **Handling**

The guinea pig's natural curiosity and friendly disposition makes it fairly easy to handle. Most guinea pigs will approach a hand introduced into their cage and can be easily scooped into the palm of the hand. Cup one hand under the rump while cradling the midsection with the other hand. A two-handed hold is always recommended. Guinea pigs unaccustomed to being handled may jump and run, but rarely turn aggressive.