

Care Cards

Guinea Pigs



Guinea pigs are rodents that share many anatomic and physiologic characteristics. Guinea pigs are small, gentle, and lively animals that make good pets because they are docile and relatively easy to care for. Guinea pigs require a dietary source of vitamin C. Birthing complications or dystocia is common in guinea pigs.

Guinea Pigs

There are three common types of domestic guinea pigs kept as pets: short-haired English and American varieties, Abyssinian, and Peruvian. Abyssinian guinea pigs have short, coarse hair that grows in whorls. Peruvians have very long hair and are kept mostly for shows.

Guinea pigs have some unusual activities that their owners should be aware of. Their response to danger is freeze or flight. They tend to either become immobile or attempt to escape when frightened. They do not tolerate dietary or environmental changes. Because of this, proper diet should be established early in life. Additionally, hospitalization of sick guinea pigs is kept to a minimum. As stated earlier, guinea pigs require a dietary source of vitamin C. Commercially available guinea pig food is milled with vitamin C; however, it is very unstable and remains active for only 90 days. I recommend owners assume the pellets contain no vitamin C and to provide it

in the form of vegetables, fruit, or in the drinking water. Food items high in vitamin C include: kale, parsley, beet greens, spinach, chicory, red and green pepper, broccoli, tomatoes, kiwi, and oranges. Vitamin C can be added to the drinking water at one gram per liter. The water should be changed daily to insure a high quality. Liquid vitamin C supplements are sold at most major drug stores. Adult, non-breeding guinea pigs require five milligrams per kilogram per day. Growing and pregnant guinea pigs require thirty mg/kg per day.

The daily diet for your guinea pig should be 50% pelleted diet, 30% hay, 20% fresh fruits and vegetables. I like to feed hard fruits and vegetables, like apples, carrots, broccoli, and kale. **Avoid any pelleted diet that has seeds mixed in,** the seed hulls can become trapped in the GI tract and require surgery to remove.

Guinea pigs are messy! This should be kept in mind when setting up their housing. I suggest a pulp-type bedding for your guinea pig, avoid all wood based products (cedar, pine shavings). Good ventilation is important to help prevent respiratory disease. The cage should be placed in a quiet area away from direct sunlight. Cage temperature should be between 65-80 degrees Fahrenheit. They can tolerate cool temperatures better than heat and should not be exposed to high temperatures or humidity because they are very susceptible to hyperthermia.

Sick guinea pigs do not tolerate clinical procedures very well and have been known to suffer respiratory and cardiac arrest after being handled under such conditions. Additionally, sick guinea pigs appear to lose the will to get better and their prognosis when sick is usually guarded for the first seventy-two hours. I have found that within seventy-two hours of the initiation of any treatment program, the guinea pig will either be



The normal body temperature of guinea pigs is 99-103 degrees Fahrenheit. The life span of a guinea pig is five to six years. Males are larger than females and usually weigh 900-1200 grams where as the females usually weigh 700-900 grams. Females weighing over 1100 grams should not be used for breeding until their weight can be lowered to a normal level. Females that are being raised for breeding should be bred by seven months of age. This early breeding will allow for more flexibility of the pelvic canal and decrease the chances for dystocia to occur. Sexual maturity occurs at two months for females and three months for males. The estrus cycle is fifteen to seventeen days. The duration of gestation is 59-72 days with an average of 68 days. Average litter size is two to four and the pups should nurse off mom for a minimum of five days. Guinea pigs begin nibbling food at two days of age. Pups are usually weaned by 21 days.

dead or noticeably improved. Guinea pigs are very susceptible to respiratory disease cause by *Bordetella bronchiseptica*. Because this organism is commonly found in healthy rabbits, I strongly recommend guinea pigs and rabbits **never** be allowed to come in contact with each other. Guinea pigs are sensitive to penicillin-based antibiotics and can be killed by the use of these medications. Therefore, always take your guinea pig to a veterinarian who is familiar with these creatures.

