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HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

guinea pigs

www.rspca.org.uk/guineapigs

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

guinea pigs

Owning and caring for guinea pigs can be very rewarding, but it's a big responsibility and a long-term commitment in terms of care and cost. Typically, guinea pigs live for five to six years but some may live longer.

Guinea pigs are small, sociable, 'chatty' rodents. There are different breeds and varieties of guinea pigs, with a wide variety of coat, colour and fur types. They are traditionally thought of as good first pets for children, but an adult should always be responsible for ensuring guinea pigs are properly handled and cared for. If you own or are responsible for guinea pigs, even on a temporary basis, you are required by law to care for them properly.



Keeping your
guinea pigs healthy
and happy

There is no one 'perfect' way to care for all guinea pigs because every guinea pig has their own personality and preferences. It is up to you how you look after your guinea pigs, but you must take reasonable steps to ensure that you look after all their needs.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, pet owners are now legally obliged to care for their pets properly – as most owners already do – by providing the following five welfare needs.

- 1 A suitable place to live.
- 2 A healthy diet, including fresh clean water.
- 3 The ability to behave normally.
- 4 Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals.
- 5 Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

This booklet will help you to find out more about what your guinea pigs need to stay healthy and happy.

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Environment

MAKE SURE YOUR GUINEA PIGS HAVE A SUITABLE PLACE TO LIVE

A traditional hutch should not be your guinea pigs' only permanent home as it will not meet their need for space and stimulation and could cause health and behaviour problems. Your guinea pigs need a large exercise area for running, exploring, playing and hiding and a secure shelter where they can rest, feel safe and are protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature.

Finding the right location

Whether you are planning to keep your guinea pigs indoors or outdoors, make sure all areas of their enclosure are well ventilated, dry and draught-free. It also needs to be safe, secure and free from hazards.

If you are housing your guinea pigs outdoors, place their home in an area that is quiet and calm and away from dogs, cats, foxes and birds of prey that they may see as a threat. Their accommodation should be sheltered from direct sun and the prevailing wind direction and off the ground so that it doesn't get damp. Ideally, when temperatures drop to below 15°C, guinea pigs should be housed indoors. If not, they must be provided with sufficient bedding throughout the whole enclosure to enable them to keep warm and a cover for their accommodation is advised.

If housed indoors, your guinea pigs' home should be in a quiet spot away from the television and music systems. It should be away from direct sources of heat such as radiators and sunny windows and protected from draughts. A room temperature of 17–20°C is ideal. If your home is centrally heated, some areas may get too hot – so think carefully about where to locate your guinea pigs' home.





Home comforts

Your guinea pigs' home should have two main areas: an enclosed, darkened area for sleeping, resting and hiding which is large enough for all the guinea pigs to rest together comfortably (the 'main shelter'), and a 'living enclosure' for activity (such as an exercise run) so they can explore, play, run and hide. Wherever possible, these two areas should be integrated and permanently attached. If this isn't possible, you should give your guinea pigs the opportunity to run and explore every day. The living enclosure needs to be big enough for lots of hiding places and tunnels and should be high enough to allow them to rear up on their back legs and stretch out when lying down.

The walls and roof of the main shelter or shelters should be solid to provide a dark, resting/sleeping area. The material used for the walls of the living enclosure should allow

⤴ These guinea pigs are kept indoors and have permanent access to a large area for exploring and running, as well as different sized shelters to rest, hide and sleep – together or apart.

your guinea pigs to look out, so they can see approaching people. Suitable materials for the enclosure walls include clear Perspex or wire mesh panels. If housed outside, their accommodation must have a secure roof to prevent predators from getting in and wire mesh or bars will protect your guinea pigs while allowing them to see out.

If housed indoors, the enclosure does not necessarily need a roof as guinea pigs do not jump or climb, as long as the enclosure is high enough to prevent your guinea pigs escaping!

The flooring of your guinea pigs' home should be a solid material which will help their nails to stay short. For example, outdoors, the home should be on concrete or grass.



House proud

Guinea pigs need lots of bedding to keep them comfortable and warm. The bedding you provide for your guinea pigs should be absorbent and safe for them to eat. Line the bottom of the shelter (or living enclosure if indoors), with newspaper and cover with paper products or shredded, chipped, ground or shaved pelleted products – products made from softwood, such as pine, should not be used as these can make your guinea pigs ill. Lots of dust-free hay should then be put on top.

Your guinea pigs' toilet areas should be cleaned every day. Each week, the whole home should be thoroughly cleaned to make sure they have clean, dry bedding. Cleaning is stressful for guinea pigs as they have a well developed sense of smell so after cleaning, place a small amount of the used bedding back into the enclosure as this will smell familiar to your guinea pigs and help to reduce any stress.

Keeping busy

Guinea pigs are intelligent and need plenty of toys and activities to prevent them from becoming bored and suffering. Your guinea pigs' home needs to be big enough for them to be active and for lots of different toys – see page 10 for tips about toys and activities to keep your guinea pigs occupied. If your guinea pigs don't have permanent access to somewhere they can run and play, you will need to provide daily access to a run.

Hiding places

Guinea pigs must be able to avoid things that scare them. They are a prey species and must be able to hide in a secure place so make sure your guinea pigs have constant access to safe hiding places such as PVC pipes, cardboard boxes and plastic shelters – where they can go to be alone if they want to or hide if they feel afraid. There must be enough places to allow all your guinea pigs to hide at the same time.





HOLIDAY TIME

If you are going away, try to find someone who will care for, and meet all your guinea pigs' welfare needs within their familiar home. If boarding your guinea pigs, try to ease the move by keeping grouped guinea pigs together and taking along familiar items such as toys and pipes.

When you transport your guinea pigs make sure they are comfortable and safe at all times. Putting familiar smelling items, something they can hide in and their guinea pig companion(s) in the carrier – and in their new environment – can help make your guinea pigs feel at ease.



Diet

MAKE SURE YOUR GUINEA PIGS HAVE A HEALTHY DIET

To stay fit, happy and healthy, your guinea pigs need a well-balanced diet of grass hay, leafy green vegetables and guinea pig pellets, as well as constant access to clean drinking water.

Make sure you check their water bottle daily for leaks and/or blockages and change your guinea pigs' water at least once a day. You should also make time to regularly clean the bottle and nozzle properly to avoid contamination and check the water doesn't freeze in winter.

Feeding time

Guinea pigs are grazers and naturally eat only grass, herbs and some plants like dandelion and groundsel. Guinea pigs will eat for long periods of time throughout the day and night and they produce two types of droppings – hard dry pellets and softer moist pellets that they eat directly from their bottom (an essential part of their diet).

Good quality hay such as Timothy hay should make up the majority of your guinea pigs' diet and must be available at all times. This helps their digestive system to work properly and keeps a guinea pig's teeth the right length and shape. In addition to hay, your guinea pigs should also have a variety of washed leafy greens. Guinea pigs are not able to make or store Vitamin C so vegetables such as kale,

cabbage, broccoli and spinach need to be provided daily.

A fresh portion of grass-based guinea-pig pellets should also be available daily, as per the manufacturer's instructions. This will provide essential Vitamin C. Vitamin C is destroyed over time and more quickly with exposure to the air so a fresh portion of pellets must be given each day – don't just top up the bowl. Buy small sealed packets of food, keep them in an airtight container and always ensure the pellets are used by the best before date!

Treats

Guinea pigs do not naturally eat cereals, root vegetables or fruit so only give root vegetables like carrots, or fruit such as apples in small amounts – e.g. an apple quarter – as a treat.

Food to avoid

Find out which plants are safe to feed your guinea pigs – for example don't feed them lawnmower clippings as these can upset a guinea pig's digestive system and make them ill. Never give them starchy vegetables or those which grow from a bulb e.g. onions or garlic.

Muesli-style foods

Guinea pigs tend to selectively feed when fed muesli style foods and eat less hay which leads to an unbalanced diet and can result in health problems. If you are currently feeding your guinea pigs muesli then it is advisable to replace the muesli with nuggets. This should be done very gradually over several weeks with advice from your vet to avoid making your guinea pigs ill.

How much?

If guinea pigs eat more food than they need, or too much of the wrong food, such as fruit or sweet treats, they will become overweight and can develop health problems. How much an individual guinea pig needs to eat depends on their age, lifestyle and state of health, so adjust how much you feed each guinea pig to make sure they don't become underweight or overweight. You can find out how to check your guinea pig's weight at: www.pfma.org.uk/guinea-pig-size-o-meter.

Growing, pregnant, nursing or underweight guinea pigs may need a larger portion of pellets. Your vet will be able to advise you about how to provide the best diet for each of your guinea pigs.

Try to avoid making any sudden changes in your guinea pigs' eating or drinking habits as this could upset their digestive system and make them very ill. If you want to introduce a new food it is best to start off by giving them a small amount and watching carefully for signs of an upset stomach. If this happens then your guinea pigs shouldn't be given that food again.

Be observant

Monitor the amount each guinea pig eats and drinks. If a guinea pig's eating or drinking habits change, if the number of droppings gets less or stops, or there are soft droppings sticking to their back end or lying around the cage, talk to your vet straight away as your guinea pig could be seriously ill.



Becky Murray/RSPCA Photolibrary



Behaviour

MAKE SURE YOUR GUINEA PIGS ARE ABLE TO BEHAVE NORMALLY

Knowing what is normal behaviour for guinea pigs will help you to quickly recognise when a guinea pig is ill and learning about your guinea pigs' behaviour is key to helping you understand how they are feeling and what they are thinking.

Guinea pigs are very social and need to interact with other friendly guinea pigs as well as people. Unlike other social animals, guinea pigs tend not to engage in rough and tumble play but instead their play is based around movement. Guinea pigs will leap, run and chase each other and you may also spot them suddenly jumping in the air, with all four feet off the ground, often turning 90° in mid-air. This is 'pop-corning' and will be seen when your pigs are excited but may also be displayed when they are very frightened and running away from something scary.

Keeping active

Guinea pigs are active during the day and night – for up to 20 hours – and sleep for only short periods so they need to access all the things they need at all times: food, water, companion guinea pigs, safe hiding places and toys.

They need to be able to run, stand fully upright on their back legs, and stretch out when lying down, so ideally they should

have free and permanent access to their exercise area. A large exercise area with pipes and shelters as well as deep areas of hay will encourage your guinea pigs to exercise and will also allow them to carry out a range of different movements and activities including running, walking, tunneling through or under hay, lying out, resting, foraging and gnawing.

Your guinea pigs will also enjoy untreated wooden toys to chew, such as fruit tree or willow sticks but avoid toys made of plastic, as they may be harmful if they chew or swallow them. Objects to manipulate such as straw/wicker/seagrass mats, baskets and balls are great for guinea pigs to investigate. Food wrapped in shredded paper and hay tucked in cardboard boxes will encourage your guinea pigs to explore.

Guinea pigs are not very agile and are poor climbers but they are inquisitive so if there are hazards within their environment they may easily injure themselves.

Being cautious

It is natural for guinea pigs to be nervous of new sights, smells and sounds and so when they explore a new environment or a new friend they will do so very slowly. They will approach stretched out with their face forward so that they can make contact with their whiskers and their weight will be on their hind legs so that they can run away if necessary. Sometimes, when they are feeling anxious they will start nibbling at food or scratching with their feet.

“What was that?”

Upon hearing a loud noise or seeing something which frightens them, guinea pigs will stop what they are doing and become very alert. They may also make short vibrating sounds which they use to warn their companions. They might stay in this frozen state for a few seconds but it can be longer. If they decide that the noise or sight was too frightening or near by they may then run away to somewhere they feel safe. This why it is important to provide hiding places – see page six.

Chatting

Guinea pigs communicate using around eleven different noises including the well-known ‘wheek-wheek’ noise – a sign of excitement or to find a friend – through to a low ‘purring’ sound when they are relaxed or seeking contact. You may hear them make a series of short ‘putt-putt’ or chutt noises when they are exploring. If your guinea pig chatters their teeth, this can be a warning signal that they are feeling angry, unhappy or frustrated and need some space.

If you hear your guinea pigs squealing, this shows they are scared or in pain. As you get to know your pets better, you will start to recognise all of these different noises. Knowing what they mean can help you to understand what your individual guinea pig is thinking and feeling and can help you identify when they are unwell.





Look at me!

Watching your guinea pig's body posture can tell you what they are feeling or thinking. Friendly encounters between guinea pigs will start with an approach and they will then sniff to fully investigate one another. It ends with a meeting, whisker to whisker – known as nosing. Some meetings will be less friendly though and you can read more about this on page 14.

Scent marking

Guinea pigs drag their bottoms across the ground, to leave scent secretions which allows them to communicate with each other. They also scent mark by rubbing their chin or cheeks across things which helps keep their home smell familiar and reassuring.

This is why it is important when you are cleaning your guinea pigs' home to make sure that you transfer some of the old bedding back into the enclosure and where possible, if a guinea pig needs to

be removed from the enclosure to travel, such as to the vet for a health check up, it is best to transport them with their companions.

» Guinea pigs like to gnaw, chew and explore by moving from one area to another through tunnels. If they get bored, and do not have enough to do, they may suffer.

SIGNS OF STRESS

If one of your guinea pig's behaviour changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet or a guinea pig behaviour expert. Guinea pigs that are frightened or in pain may change their behaviour or develop unwanted habits such as aggression.

Other signs that a guinea pig may be suffering from stress or fear can include hiding most of the time, chewing cage bars, over-grooming, altered feeding or toileting habits, over-drinking or playing with their water bottle, sitting hunched, reluctance to move, and repeated circling of the enclosure.

Be quiet and gentle around your guinea pigs. Never shout at or punish them as they are very unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your guinea pig's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice from your vet or a clinical animal behaviourist.





Company

MAKE SURE YOUR GUINEA PIGS HAVE APPROPRIATE COMPANY

Guinea pigs are naturally sociable and normally prefer to be with one or more guinea pigs. A guinea pig can develop abnormal behaviour and may suffer if they are left without company.

Keep your guinea pig with at least one other friendly guinea pig, unless advised otherwise by a vet or guinea pig behaviour expert. A good combination is a neutered male and one or more females. It is not common to neuter females as the operation is more complicated.

If you want to keep single sex pairs, then two females can live together. Litter brothers may also successfully live together, if they have been brought up together, but may still fight on occasion. The risk of fighting can be decreased by neutering them. For more information about neutering you can speak to your vet or go to www.rspca.org.uk/neutering.

Guinea pigs and rabbits have very different welfare needs and so the RSPCA does not advise that they are kept together. Rabbits can harbour bacteria which can cause breathing problems in guinea pigs and they can also bully or frighten them. The best companion for a guinea pig is another friendly guinea pig. If you do have a rabbit and guinea pig which live together you can

find more information at www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitsandguineapigs.

Making friends

Introduce new guinea pigs gradually and under supervision, preferably in a space that is new to both guinea pigs. To make sure your guinea pigs don't become stressed or unhappy during the introductions it is best to seek advice from a guinea pig behaviour expert.

Guinea pigs kept together will naturally form an 'order' with some animals being more dominant than others. If there are not enough places in the accommodation for guinea pigs to hide or spend time away from each other, they can become stressed and may start to bully lower ranking guinea pigs.

Hands on

It is important to establish a good relationship with your guinea pigs. This is rewarding for you both but also makes catching and checking them much less stressful. Handling your guinea pigs gently every day from an early age and being relaxed and calm around them can help them learn to value and enjoy your company.

If your guinea pig has to be kept on their own for some reason you must spend time interacting with them every day.

Young guinea pigs are likely to be nervous when you first take them home so you shouldn't handle them initially. During the first few days simply talk quietly to them. Encourage them to approach you by offering healthy treats.

You can then start to gently stroke them and when they become more comfortable and confident with this, you can gradually get them used to being picked up. Using both hands, place one hand under your guinea pig's chest so their front legs are either side of your fingers and use your other hand to support their back and rear. Once they get to know you they'll enjoy

spending time with you, but not all guinea pigs like being picked up and held. If your guinea pigs are frightened or are not relaxed and happy, interactions are better and safer at ground level.

Other animals

Guinea pigs will usually be scared of cats and dogs so it is important that you never leave your guinea pigs unsupervised with another animal or person who may (deliberately or accidentally) harm or frighten them. Avoid leaving them unsupervised with a cat or dog, even if you think they will be fine together.

Guinea pigs and children

It is important to teach children to handle guinea pigs sensibly and carefully. To minimise risk of injury, ask children to sit on the ground when holding or petting guinea pigs.





Health & welfare

MAKE SURE YOUR GUINEA PIGS ARE PROTECTED FROM PAIN, SUFFERING, INJURY AND DISEASE

Signs of illness and pain can be difficult to spot in guinea pigs so it is very important that you get to know your guinea pigs' normal behaviour when they are fit and healthy. A change in the way a guinea pig normally behaves can be an early sign they are ill or in pain. If a guinea pig is not eating, is more quiet or hiding more than usual, they are highly likely to be ill or in pain.

Guinea pigs are vulnerable to many infectious diseases and other illnesses including vitamin C deficiency, urinary tract infections, breathing problems and swollen or sore foot pads. They are especially vulnerable to dental disease and if they are stressed they are much more likely to become ill.

Check your guinea pigs for signs of illness or injury every day, and make sure this is done by someone else if you are away. See your vet immediately if you see any changes that might indicate that your guinea pig is in pain, ill or injured.

Guinea pigs are very different animals to cats and dogs and so it is important to find and register with a vet who specialises in guinea pigs. Think about taking out pet insurance to make sure your guinea pigs are covered if they need veterinary treatment.





Health checklist

You should carry out a health check every day to make sure that your guinea pigs are happy and healthy.

- Watch your guinea pigs at feeding time to check that they are eating without any difficulty and their normal amount. You can also make sure that their chin isn't wet after they have eaten or that they are drooling. If you do spot any of these signs it is important to seek veterinary advice immediately.
- Look at their eyes, ears and nose to make sure there isn't any discharge. A small amount of white discharge around the eyes is commonly seen when a guinea pig is grooming themselves, but if this increases or decreases, or there is a discharge at other times, it may be a sign that your guinea pig is ill.
- Check feet for signs of sores or red patches.
- Any scratching or rubbing of ears or head shaking may be an indication of ear mites.
- Breathing should be regular and quiet.
- They should move well without any lameness or appearing to be in pain.
- Their coat should be in good condition as well as their skin. Check they are not scratching or rubbing their ears as this can be a sign of mites.
- Teeth shouldn't be overgrown, broken or loose. If you see any problems seek advice from a vet – only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.
- Nails shouldn't be overlong or damaged.
- They should be able to urinate without any pain and there should be no blood in their urine.
- Droppings should be small, elongated and firm pellets. If the amount of droppings reduces, stops or changes – e.g. becomes loose – then seek veterinary advice immediately.

TAKE YOUR GUINEA PIGS FOR A ROUTINE HEALTH CHECK WITH YOUR VET AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR.



The more time you spend with your guinea pigs the more familiar you will become with their behaviour and the easier it will be to spot when something is wrong.

- Grooming your guinea pig's coat regularly can allow you to check their coat and overall body condition and long-haired varieties will need daily grooming. If you are not sure how to groom your guinea pigs properly, talk to a pet care specialist as grooming needs to be introduced slowly and positively. If a guinea pig changes their grooming habits, you should talk to your vet as your guinea pig may be ill.
- Weigh your guinea pigs on a weekly basis and write down their weights so that you can look out for any changes.
- In warm weather you should check the fur and skin around your guinea pig's rear end twice a day, as urine staining or droppings that are stuck will attract flies, which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal.



POISONING

Never 'watch and wait'. If you suspect a guinea pig has been poisoned – contact a vet immediately.

Prevent poisoning in the home by:

- keeping houseplants where your guinea pigs cannot reach them and collecting dropped leaves/petals
- keeping pesticides away from areas your guinea pigs can access.

When outside:

- ensure housing/exercise areas are free from, and not overhung by, poisonous plants
- change your guinea pigs' water supplies regularly and make sure they cannot become contaminated.

FIND OUT MORE...

Guinea pigs are amazing animals with complex needs that must be met if they are to stay happy and healthy.

There's loads more to learn about guinea pigs on the RSPCA website – from our factfile about guinea pigs to detailed advice sheets on various aspects of guinea pig care. So make sure you visit:

www.rspca.org.uk/guineapigs

Keeping your
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If you are thinking of taking on guinea pigs, you've researched their behaviour and welfare needs, and you're committed to taking care of them for life, please think about giving a home to some of the rescue guinea pigs available for adoption at RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales.

www.rspca.org.uk/rehoming

**This booklet
will help you to
find out what guinea
pigs need to stay
healthy and
happy.**



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