



## Guinea Pigs

Scientific Name: *Cavia porcellus*

Written by Dr. Scott Medlin

**Background:** Guinea pigs are adorable little mammals who are technically defined as rodents, but are more specifically categorized as a member of the Caviidae family. This family's members include the capybara, the Patagonian mara, and several species of animals referred to specifically as cavies and guinea pigs (*Cavia tschudii*, *Cavia aperea*, *Cavia fulgida*, etc). All of these species originate in South America.

However, if you are envisioning little guinea pigs running around the underbrush of the Amazon rainforests, you would be wrong. Actually, guinea pigs were domesticated by the native people of the eastern Andes (including Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, etc.) region for hundreds or possibly thousands of years. Although there are closely related species still present in South America, there are no *Cavia porcellus* in the wild.

Because they originate from a mountainous rather than a jungle area, guinea pigs are actually much more comfortable at 65°F than they are at 85°F. In fact, prolonged exposure to the direct summer temperatures of Southern Florida can result in heat stroke, and possibly death, if the condition is not treated. These pets will do best in the shade or preferably in air conditioning, especially during the summer months.

Typical lifespans for guinea pigs range from 5-7 years of age, although we do occasionally see a guinea pig that survives up to 8 years of age. Sexual maturity generally reached by 2 to 3 months of age (females often mature more quickly than males).

**Enclosure:** There are several acceptable forms of guinea pig enclosures. One of the easiest to clean that also maximizes your guinea pig's area to exercise and play is called a C&C cage (<http://www.guineapigcagesstore.com/>). However, other cage types area also acceptable.

Most pet stores will carry a rabbit/guinea pig cage that in composed of a smooth plastic bottom attached to a wire cage top. It is recommended that you purchase the largest size that you can because your guinea pig will need to move around, exercise, and have plenty of room to "popcorn" when they are feeling happy. A minimum of 2' x 3' is required for a single guinea pig. You should double that size for two guinea pigs that will be housed together.

Hiding "huts" and "pigloos" are ideal hiding spaces for your guinea pig to retreat to. This species is a little nervous by nature, and having access to a hiding spot should be considered a requirement, not an option.

**Substrate:** Just like every other species, cedar and pine substrates are not acceptable. Cedar and pine substrates both contain phenols (volatile oils that aerosolize). These phenols are present in sufficient amounts to cause irritation to the respiratory tract of animals that are in constant exposure to them.



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This irritated respiratory tract is then highly susceptible to developing bacterial infections (possibly leading to pneumonia, and if not treated, death).

Good substrates include Carefresh brand litter, newspaper, or even aspen. Fleece is a type of bedding that is starting to gain popularity. Just remember that if you choose to use fleece bedding, it is extremely important to watch for signs of your guinea pig chewing or eating the fleece bedding. If your pig starts eating fleece, you need to discontinue its use and start using something else instead. Also, fleece needs to be changed on a regular basis. I recommend changing it every 24 to 48 hours.

**Exercise:** The less space that your guinea pig has in its cage means the more time that should be set aside to allow your guinea pig to run around outside of its enclosure. Some owners approach this play time by simply setting the guinea pig free in their home.

Rabbits and guinea pigs can both run into issues around the home. Please take a moment to read this short article put together by the House Rabbit Society for “rabbit-proofing” your home. It’s written for bunnies, but covers many issues that guinea pigs owners face as well. ["Rabbit Proofing"](#)

Other owners prefer to provide some type of larger play area that does not allow access to the entire home and allows for easier clean-up. Two easy examples of this are

1. Setting the guinea pig loose in the bathroom (you will still need to guinea-pig-proof the room by eliminating access to cleaning solutions, plants, wires, etc) for a couple of hours.
2. Using a plastic “children’s pool” placed in the community area of your home.

Regardless of how you provide play time to your guinea pig, be sure to provide them with a couple of hiding spots so they can have a place to retreat when they are feeling skittish.

As always when working with herbivores, be sure to provide your guinea pig with plenty of hay and water even during playtime.

**Diet:** The most important point that should be taken from this entire husbandry sheet is that **your guinea pig needs large amounts of hay** to stay healthy. You could feed nothing except hay, and your pig would be a happy, healthy pig. Everything that you feed that is not hay or water is a treat, and should be fed in portion sizes accordingly. Do not make the mistake of thinking that pellets = guinea pig food. In fact, pellets = treat.

**Hay:** Start with a good foundation of hay. Offer a large handful of twice daily of a high quality timothy hay, orchard grass, or oat hay. Hay should be available at all times. Also, guinea pigs will select out their favorite pieces, and trample down the less desirable pieces of hay. They are much more adept at figuring out which pieces are the “good” pieces than we are, so you need to offer enough so that your guinea pig



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can sift through the hay and have a selection. Because the hay you offer in the morning may be all smashed down and covered in urine by the evening, it's a good idea to offer hay twice daily.

**Pellets:** When offering pellets only give a tablespoon (or less) per day per guinea pig. You should avoid alfalfa based pellets as well as pellet-mixtures that add seeds, dehydrated fruits and vegetables, and little carbohydrate-based pellets. Those dehydrated, high carbohydrate bits are considered junk food and can inhibit your pet's ability to digest food properly. Even the good-quality, hay-based pellets are mixed with binders (like molasses) that help keep the hay shavings in that pellet-shape, and that's more than enough junk food all by itself. One of the best quality pellets is made by the brand Oxbow.

**Fresh greens and veggies:** Fresh foods are encouraged! Just make sure that you are only offering a relatively small amount of veggies compared to the amount of hay they eat. Remember, hay is the primary food and fresh foods are the treat. Especially good options for guinea pigs are the soft lettuces such as romaine, green leaf, red leaf, and boston lettuces. Bell peppers, endive, small amounts of carrot, small amounts of berries or apple or oranges, and zucchini are also good choices that pigs enjoy.

Try and avoid the dark leafy greens such as kale, collard greens, turnip greens, and mustard greens. Even though your guinea pig may like the taste of them, these types of greens are all high in calcium. There is some suspicion that high levels of calcium in the diet may be associated with bladder stones, and it is better to avoid this possible issue than risk having to deal with surgical removal of a bladder stone.

**Supplements:** One of the most common reasons that guinea pigs get sick and need to see the vet is due to a lack of proper supplements. Guinea pigs cannot synthesize their own vitamin C, so owners must add it to their pets' diet as a supplement.

Low levels of vitamin C can cause a multitude of health problems with your guinea pig including eye, skin issues, respiratory, joint/mobility, and molar issues. If your guinea pig is sick, your veterinarian will likely need to evaluate your husbandry to assess whether the vitamin C level is appropriate because this is such a common health issue for this species.

A high quality vitamin C supplement should be used to prevent hypovitaminosis C (scurvy). These can sometimes be challenging to get into your guinea pig, so if you are having difficulty getting your pet to take the vitamin C you should consult with your veterinarian for alternatives.

Be cautious of the vitamin C supplements that are added to the water source. The vitamin C additive breaks down when exposed to light, is ingested in inconsistent amounts, may cause avoidance of the water altogether, and has been shown to promote bacterial growth in the water. Instead use Oxbow vitamin C tablets or a high-quality vitamin C liquid supplement designed for human consumption.



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**Water:** Your guinea pig needs access to fresh, clean water at all times. Both a water bottle and a water dish can be appropriate. However, guinea pigs are sometimes messy and can occasionally walk through, tip over, or poop into the water dish. Therefore, changing the water dish once daily is mandatory. If you opt to use a water bottle, test it at least once daily to ensure that the mechanism is working appropriately and that water flows easily when the mechanism is pushed. Guinea pigs can become dehydrated relatively easily.