



GUINEA PIG CARE GUIDE

Congrats on considering a new guinea pig to join your family! They are sassy, fluffy balls of joy that will be a wonderful addition to your life. They require tailored care, and this guide is an introduction to the care they require.

GUINEA PIG OVERVIEW

These chatty little creatures, known as cavy, are part of the rodent family and typically live 4-8 years depending on their breed. Female guinea pigs are sometimes referred to as *sows* and males referred to as *boars*. They originate from South America, and have become popular pets worldwide. Unlike dogs and cats, they are considered exotic animals and as a result require tailored care (and an exotic vet!).

HABITAT

Environment

Guinea pigs are very social creatures, so the best place for their cages are places where they will have the most human interactions - they like living rooms or central areas in the home where they see people and will become accustomed to your presence. They like a temperature range of 65-75 degrees Fahrenheit and should be away from direct sources of sunlight or heat since they can overheat quickly.

Cage Size

Guinea pigs need lots of space to run and play - they need horizontal space rather than vertical since they cannot climb. They can hop onto ledges, but not every guinea pig will do so.

# of Pigs	Minimum	PREFERRED	In Grids
	7.5 sq ft	more is better 30" x 36"	2x3
	7.5 sq ft	10.5 sq feet 30" x 50"	2x4
	10.5 sq ft	13 sq feet 30" x 62"	2x5
	13 sq ft	more is better 30" x 76"	2x6

Bedding

When it comes to bedding, the most popular choices are **fleece**, **paper bedding**, or **shavings** - but be careful with shavings! The only ones that are safe are Aspen shavings; pine and cedar are respiratory irritants for small animals. When purchasing shavings be sure to check what kind it is on the packaging. Fleece tends to be the most popular choice since it can be layered, washed, and poop can be scooped easily. Paper bedding, such as Carefresh, can be a good choice for odor control.

Maintenance

The bedding type, number of guinea pigs, and how determined they are to make a mess of their cage will determine cage cleaning frequency. For fleece bedding generally once a day poop scooping helps keep the cage clean until the weekly, twice a week, or every other day fleece changes. For paper bedding and shavings, it doesn't require daily scoops but will need a full change more frequently. Many people who are new to guinea pigs are surprised by how much 1 or 2 guinea pigs can poop. Make no mistake, they poop a lot! The more they poop the better: it means they are consistently eating which is critical for a healthy piggie.

DIET

Hay

The number one thing guinea pigs need in their diet is hay. They should always have access to hay - their gastrointestinal tract is constantly on the move and constantly needs hay! **Timothy** and/or **Orchard Grass** hay are the best for guinea pigs; **Alfalfa** is another option, but it should be reserved for guinea pigs under a year, underweight, or pregnant guinea pigs since it is a fatty option. Orchard Grass is the more allergy friendly option for humans!

Veggies

The general rule for guinea pigs is one cup of veggies per day per guinea pig. Like humans, guinea pigs will develop favorites! The best chart options are below:

<https://www.guineapigcages.com/food/Veggie-and-Fruit-Charts.pdf>

<http://happycavy.com/what-can-guinea-pigs-eat>

https://www.guinealynx.info/diet_vegs.html

Please note that iceberg lettuce is not suitable for guinea pigs. It has no nutritional value for guinea pigs and can make them very sick.

Pellets

Timothy-based pellets are the best choice for guinea pigs- avoiding nuts, seeds, or brightly colored pellets is key as they are basically candy with limited nutritional value. **Oxbow** pellets are the gold standard and have multiple options. Adult guinea pig pellets should be used after 8-months of age, and the standard feeding is 1/8 cup of pellets per pig per day.

Treats

Guinea pigs love treats! A slice of pepper, cucumber, or apple is always a lovely treat for them, but there are other options. Timothy-based treats are a favorite of most guinea pigs. Oxbow makes several that are guinea pig suitable and feeding instructions will be on the package. Avoid any treats that have yogurt, seeds, nuts, or are not made primarily of timothy, alfalfa, or barley.

BEHAVIOR

Friends

Guinea pigs are very social animals - they almost always do better with friends! There are some exceptions who like to live alone, usually older males. Females tend to bond the easiest with each other, then a male with females, and two adult boars have the most difficult time bonding. Males work best in pairs and females work well in pairs and up. They can get depressed living alone!

Chewing/Toys

Guinea pigs will chew on any and everything. Their teeth are constantly growing, and they use them to inspect their world around them. They enjoy willow sticks, compressed timothy snacks, wood huts, and more! They might even give you a gentle nibble from time to time.

Play

Guinea pigs are playful, exploratory creatures. Giving a blocked off space on the floor with things to chew is an excellent way to encourage play. Not all guinea pigs will be on board with the idea, but some do very well with a space to run around for even a short while, even if it's only a few times a week.

Body Language

Wheeking - Depending on comfort and personality, guinea pigs can be very chatty. Wheeking is the most notorious of the guinea pig noises- it's a sharp loud whistle like noise that can indicate a few things. Guinea pigs tend to be chatty when they're happy and comfortable, and wheeking is usually to demand food. If they have figured out their veggies come from the fridge or a plastic bag, and can hear it from their pen location, they might begin to wheek when they hear those noises. Guinea pigs don't wheek when frightened, so this is a way of knowing they're comfortable enough to demand food!

Chatting, Chattering, and Cleaning - Comfortable guinea pigs can be incredibly chatty when comfortable- common happy sounds are similar to wheeking, although quieter. Some guinea pigs like 'talking' to each other or their owners; it will depend on the guinea pig's personality. Chattering is a little different, and usually indicates displeasure. They will clack their teeth together rapidly, like a woodpecker, usually while 'fluffed' up. Guinea pigs may also look fluffed just before cleaning themselves - it is distinct and if they do so in the open or in proximity to their humans, it indicates a high level of comfort.

Freezing - When guinea pigs are incredibly frightened they will freeze in place, breathe heavily and refuse to move (and if they do move, they bolt to the nearest hiding place). In cases like this they were spooked by something- they usually will refuse treats and bribes for several minutes while calming down.

The best thing to do in these cases is give them space, but returning with a small treat after a few minutes can help entice them out of hiding.

Popcorning and Zoomies - This is a sign of very happy guinea pigs! Popcorning looks like a guinea pig doing a small jump and twisting- at first it can be alarming because it kind of looks like a spasm. If this is accompanied by wheeking and running in large circles, or zoomies, this is a very happy piggie. It's almost like their little bodies can't contain their joy!

Purring - Purring can mean one of two things with guinea pigs when pet- very happy or very mad. A long purr, followed by or with relaxed body language such as closed eyes or flattening out indicates happiness with the petting situation. This could also include a slight butt wiggle while they get comfortable 'pancaking' out. A short purr followed by annoyed body language, such as fluffed fur, tightly hunched posture, or followed by chattering says they do not like being pet this way or right now and want it to stop. If it is not stopped, it could be followed by aggressive chattering or even a small nip.

Rumble-strutting - Rumble-strutting is usually an example of dominance, excitement, or happiness depending on context. It looks like the guinea pigs back-end swaying side to side with a low purring sound, like a rumble. If a guinea pig is near another and begins this behavior, it can be strutting for overt interest or dominance. If a human is petting them and this happens, it can be happiness if they don't begin to chatter or run.

HEALTH CARE

Exotic vets vs regular vet

When going to the vet, guinea pigs must see an exotic vet. Not all veterinary clinics have an exotic vet, so it is important to check before visiting. They have unique GI (Gastro Intestinal) systems that are always in motion, and their health concerns are very unlike cats and dogs. Annual vet visits are recommended for guinea pigs unless another health concern requires an earlier visit.

At home health checks and care

Guinea pigs are experts at hiding illness, and one of the fastest ways for an owner to catch anything is through weekly weight checks. It is recommended to weigh before veggies since breakfast can inflate their weight temporarily. A kitchen scale with an assigned 'bucket' or other open container works best. A significant weight change (over 100g), either suddenly or gradual, should prompt a call or visit to the vet. It is also important to check the pads of their feet and check for unusual lumps or bumps weekly. Veggie bribes are usually incredibly successful for such endeavors.

Nails

Guinea pigs need their nails trimmed every four to six weeks; like cats and dogs they have a visible wick in the nail. Vets offices will usually offer this as a service if you are uncomfortable, otherwise a cat nail

clipper works well. Dark nails can be tricky - shining a light under the nail can make the wick clearer. Snacks as a distraction are recommended - it can be a little scary at first, but over time it gets easier! If you have a wiggly pig, they can be wrapped gently in a blanket to isolate the front or back half at a time. If you do clip the nail too short, just like a dog/cat, the wick will bleed. There are many Stip-tic products available that are for sealing these kinds of small injuries. Guinea pigs sometimes chew on their own nails, but if they don't you will notice them slowly curl the longer they are not clipped. If they are not clipped often enough it can lead to discomfort and pain, which will make them less likely to move around, and bumblefoot can begin to form.

Skin Tags

Guinea Pigs can develop small tags on their bodies just like humans. Usually they are small and do not cause any discomfort to the guinea pig. They can feel like little pimples and stick out of a paw like an extra little finger. They are not common in all piggies and are usually harmless. If you are unsure if it is a skin tag or the start of something worse, be sure to contact your vet for advice until you are versed enough in your pig to know the difference yourself. Never try and pull off a skin tag!

Nipples

Guinea Pigs have nipples. This is sometimes surprising for some people. All guinea pigs, male and female, have a pair of nipples on the belly, close to their back legs. Sometimes they stick out a little bit, sometimes they are soft and barely noticeable. Some female guinea pigs can develop small crust build up around their nipples when they begin to age. It is not very common and can gently be washed off with a washcloth if they don't clean it themselves.

Bumblefoot

Bumblefoot is a type of infection on a guinea pig's paws. Bumblefoot typically occurs because of poor hygiene conditions, or prolonged inactivity. Sometimes certain types of bedding can irritate piggies' feet; when clipping nails be sure to check their paws to keep aware of the color of their pads. Pink and brown are typically healthy colors. Bumblefoot starts off like a red inflammation/swelling on the paw; it can be very painful for the pig and if untreated can lead to an abscess and create more health risks for the piggie later in life. Amputation can be necessary in extreme cases. If you notice what looks like the start of Bumblefoot on your piggie, contact the vet.

Abscesses

Abscesses are the result of an untreated infection. They are pus filled cavities which grow in response to a localized infection. Abscesses can be easy or hard to find depending on how furry the pig is. If you find any kind of abscess on your piggie contact your vet immediately. Antibiotics are the go-to response and they usually make full recoveries.

All about that poop!

Guinea pigs poop - a lot. They consume, in hay alone, up to their body mass in under a week. Their GI tracts are always going, and should always be going. As a result, poop can indicate a lot about a guinea pig's health. Normal poop should be solid pellets in light brown to dark brown color without a strong smell. Occasionally, there will be green pellets that have a strong smell - these are called **caecals** and are full of essential vitamins, and guinea pigs will eat them. Sometimes when they have too many veggies or ones that don't agree with them, there can be softer, squishy poop. These are okay once in a while, but it could be whatever they were fed that particular day didn't agree with them and their diet should be adjusted accordingly. If they are providing liquid diarrhea, this is an emergency vet visit.

When to see a vet

If you find your guinea pig has had a significant weight change (beyond babies growing into adult size), has a runny nose, crusty eyes, new lumps or bumps, inflamed feet, or anything else unusual for them- they should be off to the vet. When in doubt, call your vet.

Emergencies

Emergency vet visits (as in as soon as possible, they cannot always wait a day) are needed when you find a guinea pig is refusing all food (and can confirm they have not eaten any food in 4-6 hours), is lethargic, has diarrhea, large open cuts, peeing blood, crying while attempting to pee, or has a serious fall.

Critical Care

If a guinea pig has had surgery or any sort of illness and is struggling to eat or gain weight, **Critical Care** is needed as a supplement to get them back to peak health. It is a good thing to always have on hand- most guinea pigs enjoy it! It is a good idea to practice with syringe feeding just in case- if guinea pigs are unafraid of a syringe for feeding, it will usually be easier for any emergency in which you might have to feed them.

Boar cleaning and care

If you have an unneutered boar, they require a little extra care to clean their bits. The LA Guinea Pig Rescue on YouTube has several video tutorials on how to do so. As males get older, it has to be done more frequently, and they will need checks to make sure they do not have impaction. This occurs because of the sac the bits are in expands over time, and feces can get stuck. This very, very rarely happens in females or neutered boars.

Spaying & Neutering

All operations have their risks, and guinea pigs do not do well with anesthesia. The main reason a guinea pig is neutered is so a male can live with one or more females. It is always safer to neuter a male. Spaying females is far more invasive and should only be done at vet recommendation regarding ovarian cysts.

If males are neutered they are less likely to have impaction later on in life, and tend to require less specialized boar cleaning. Neutering does not affect behavior. If you have an aggressive male, neutering will not make him more docile and easier to bond to another male.

RESOURCES

<http://www.guinealynx.info/>

<http://cavymadness.com/>

<http://www.guineapigcages.com/>

FAQ

How do I get my guinea pig to like me?

Guinea pigs are **incredibly food motivated**. If they associate you with food, chances are they'll like you more. During the first week or two of having your new guinea pig, we recommend that you divide their daily veggies in half- first half during mealtime, and the second half throughout the day from your hands to help negate some of their instinctual fear.

My guinea pig always runs away from me. What do I do?

Over time they will become used to you - but even guinea pigs who are handled daily for years will still run away at times. They are prey animals and their instinct when they see a big scary animal is to flee. Usually if you shake a food bag, their instinct to run gets overridden by their greedy little tummies!

My guinea pig is jumping and shaking/twisting?! Are they okay?

Yes! What you're seeing is what's known as a popcorn. Guinea pigs will do this when they are incredibly happy - they just can't contain their joy so they shake it out!

My guinea pig never sleeps! Are they okay?

It may look like they never sleep- but they actually sleep with their eyes open, and frequently in a sitting position! As they get comfortable they may lay down or even close their eyes to sleep- this is a sign that they feel incredibly safe in their environment. If they do this on your lap, they trust you very much.

I'm having a bad reaction to my guinea pigs, is there anything I can do?

You should see your doctor if it's serious, but if it's a minor irritant or hives from touching them/their food there's a strong chance it's the Timothy hay. Switching to Orchard Grass can help alleviate minor symptoms.

How do I pick up my guinea pig?



Sniff!

Scoop!

Keep tummy and back legs supported

Support!

Snuggle!

Another technique (that is very kid friendly!): if you have a cuddle sack, while holding it open, you can place a treat at the back of it to try to get them to crawl in. Once they are in all the way, slide your hand underneath while picking the sack straight up - they will be covered so they'll feel more secure. The quicker you do this one, the easier it is for the guinea pig. Some pigs will adapt to this, some won't - it will depend on the guinea pig! Over time you shouldn't need the treat bribe anymore.

The most important thing when picking up your guinea pig is keeping their spine in alignment, and avoid picking them up by legs or tummies. They prefer their back legs supported, and it helps keep their spine in alignment (and makes them feel more comfortable and safe!)

My guinea pig is eating their poop! Is this normal?

Yes! Guinea pigs have a special type of poop they eat called a cecal pellet. You might only see this as them bending in half and 'cleaning' down under, but they might just be pulling that special, uh, pellet out. It's full of nutrients for them and is important to their health. You will rarely see this in the cage but if you do, it's greenish, mushy, and will have a strong smell. They also might nibble on their or their cage mates poop from time to time.

How often should I bathe my guinea pigs?

Not often at all! Short haired guinea pigs should need baths very infrequently - less than once a year. Unneutered males will more frequently need their behinds washed, as they have a bit of a boar stank. Senior or disabled guinea pigs might also need more frequent baths, as they might struggle with self-cleaning. It will depend on the guinea pig! Long haired guinea pigs require different care and will require more bathing since they might get their hair a little dirtier. Skinny guinea pigs require a completely different set of skin care as well since they have no hair, and incredibly dry skin! Bathing can be very stressful for them, and should only be done when needed (and with treats after!).