



GUINEA PIG CARE GUIDE



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Pet ownership has many benefits for children, from teaching them responsibility, to developing language skills and providing support in times of stress. There are also advantages for the family as a whole: it has been found that families with pets have fewer and less serious relationship problems, as animal care helps children to develop empathy and be more selfless in their human relationships.

Dealing with animals encourages children to have respect for others, but it also helps them to build a positive self-image, children who interact with animals tending to have much higher self-esteem than those who don't.

As animals communicate through body language, children who live and play with them learn to interpret this, which in turn helps them to read human body language and so have stronger social skills. Playing with and caring for animals helps to build spoken language skills too, as well as developing concentration. This aspect is particularly beneficial for children with special needs such as Down's Syndrome or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Animal interaction captures their attention and so develops their ability to concentrate.

Perhaps most importantly, animals can support children in times of stress or change, or when human relationships are strained.

CHOOSING YOUR GUINEA PIG

Notes to parents

Guinea pigs are ideal for young, first time pet owners. They may be rather shy, but are gentle, easy to handle and are unlikely to bite or scratch. Long-haired guinea pigs are not really suitable for very young children, as they need daily grooming. Guinea pigs live for around four to eight years and both males and females make good pets.

Which one is for you?

Guinea pigs may have long or short hair, which can be just one colour or a mixture of two or three colours - usually black, brown, red or white.

There are three most common types of guinea pig:

English Self guinea pigs are short-haired and are the most common type.

Abyssinian guinea pigs have a short, rougher coat that stands out in whorls or rosettes.

Peruvian guinea pigs are a more unusual type and have long hair.

Guinea pigs can be a little bit shy, but they are inquisitive. Once they get to know you they will be friendly and enjoy being handled.

Where from?

Guinea pigs are sold at most pet shops, or you could try a local breeder. Make sure that the pets at the place where you buy your guinea pig from are kept in large, clean cages and that the staff or breeders are knowledgeable.

When you buy your guinea pig he should be around six weeks old. He will be ready to leave his mum by then.





A healthy guinea pig

Guinea pigs are likely to be a bit shy with strangers, but they should also be alert and curious.

A healthy guinea pig should have:

- Bright, clear eyes
- A clean, shiny coat with no bald patches or insects in his fur Clean feet with short nails
- Note, it is normal for guinea pigs to have four toes on his front feet and only three on his back feet
- Top teeth that just touch the bottom teeth
- Guinea pigs are rather plump looking by nature, so make sure that the guinea pig you buy isn't too thin.

GUINEA PIG HOME AND EQUIPMENT

Starter kit

Before you buy a guinea pig there are some important things that you should have ready at home.

These are:

- a cage
- a nest box
- some bedding
- some hay
- a food bowl and some food
- a water bottle
- some vitamin supplements
- a mineral stone
- a brush and comb

You will also need a small, ventilated box to take your guinea pig home in. The pet shop may give you a cardboard box. This is ok for short journeys, but a plastic container with air holes and a lid is more secure and will be useful to keep your guinea pig in when you are cleaning out his cage.

Company for your guinea pig

Guinea pigs live in big families in the wild and so they don't like to live alone. It is best for two or more guinea pigs to live together. Never leave your guinea pig alone with other pets in your household.

Notes to parents

Female guinea pigs will live happily together and so will males, although males are more likely to fight. Females will also live in harmony with males, but remember to have all animals neutered if you are housing mixed sexes together. Whatever mix you decide on, it is best to buy all animals together when they are young. There is less chance of fighting and bullying that way.

Buying the right cage

Your guinea pig will need a large cage with a deep, plastic tray that is easy to clean and has room for lots of bedding to snuggle into. Living World has cages just like this. The Guinea Pig Resort Starter Kit is ideal for when you first bring your guinea pig home and the bigger Guinea Pig Resort is big enough for when he gets older.

When your guinea pig grows bigger and he is tamer, he can live outside in a hutch during the summer. One end of the hutch should be partitioned off so that your guinea pig has a dark, private bedroom area. If your hutch doesn't have separate sleeping quarters, you could buy a Living World Log Cabin to put in the hutch. The hutch's wire mesh should be good quality to protect your guinea pig. It must have small enough holes to keep out mice and be strong and securely attached to keep out predators such as dogs, cats or foxes who might attack your guinea pig.





Soft bedding

Your guinea pig will like to burrow and hide, so you must give him plenty of bedding. You can choose from many different types of bedding, for example Living World's Shavings, Alpine Hay, Wheat Straw and Corn Cobs. Don't use cat litter as this may contain harmful chemicals and never use cotton wool, tissues or synthetic fibres either as these are dangerous for your guinea pig. It is best to put a layer of shavings on the hutch or cage floor and a bundle of hay in the sleeping area. Your guinea pigs will love playing and hiding in the hay and will enjoy nibbling on it, which is also good for them.

Where should the cage go?

In the summer, your guinea pig can live outside. When it is cold in winter, your guinea pig's cage or hutch could go in a warm, well-ventilated shed, but it is best for him to be inside. Wherever it is, the hutch should be in a safe, sheltered place, away from draughts and not in direct sunlight.

Your guinea pig's outdoor hutch will need weather proofing and it should have a sloping roof so that rain can drain off. It will also need a canopy to stop rain getting into the hutch in wet weather. Make sure that the hutch is not directly on the ground - it should be on legs so that it doesn't get damp.

Alternatively if you want to keep your guinea pig warm and dry all year round the indoor cages like Living World Resort cages provide an ideal home. These modern style cages are made from strong plastic which makes them lightweight and easy to clean. The cage should be situated in a safe and quiet area of the house that does not get too hot or too cold. Make sure that they are not situated in a draught or direct sunlight.

A water bottle for fresh water

Guinea pigs need clean, fresh water at all times. You can buy easy to clean, leak-proof water bottles and water bottle holders from Living World. These are better than a bowl as they keep the water clean and prevent it dripping onto food or bedding. You can also easily check that your guinea pig is drinking. If he's not, this could be a sign that something is wrong.

You should change the water and clean the bottle every day. When you do this, squeeze the bottle to check that the valve isn't blocked and the water comes out easily. Make sure that you put the bottle where your guinea pig can reach it easily.

A sturdy food bowl

You will need a food bowl that your guinea pig can't tip over easily. Plastic or stainless steel bowls are too light. Ceramic or earthenware bowls such as Living World's Guinea Pig Ceramic Dish are best. These are easy to clean and unlikely to tip up.

KEEPING YOUR GUINEA PIG'S HOME CLEAN

Guinea pigs are tidy and fussy and prefer to live in a clean cage or hutch. You should do some housekeeping every day and give it a thorough clean at least once a fortnight.

While you are cleaning your guinea pig's home, put him in a travel cage or Living World Exercise Wheel so that he can't escape while the door is open and is not disturbed by your cleaning routine.

Daily cleaning tasks

Every day you should:

- Remove wet bedding and clean the toilet area.
- Add fresh bedding.
- Make sure your guinea pig has enough hay.
- Remove uneaten food.
- Empty and wash the food bowl in hot, soapy water, then rinse and dry it thoroughly before refilling with food.
- Empty, rinse and refill the water bottle, checking it for leaks and blockages.





A thorough clean

Every week or fortnight you should:

- Remove everything and brush out the hutch or cage.
- In summer, you can scrub outdoor hutches with hot, soapy water, paying special attention to the corners. Rinse the hutch well and let it dry out thoroughly before laying new bedding.
- Don't scrub your hutch during the winter if you keep your guinea pig in a shed - it won't dry properly. Instead, wipe it lightly with mild, pet-safe disinfectant.
- This is another reason why it may be easier to have an indoor cage like Living World Resort as they can be scrubbed with a pet-safe disinfectant before being rinsed and dried thoroughly.

Safety check

Every time you clean your hutch or cage, check it for damage and danger areas. Check for holes, rust and sharp edges and ensure the door and catches fasten securely.

FEEDING YOUR GUINEA PIG

Too much change will upset your guinea pig and changing his food quickly could make him very ill. When you first bring him home, make sure you feed him the same food as the pet shop for the first week. You can then slowly start to give him new foods.

A vegetarian diet

Your guinea pig is a herbivore, which is similar to a human vegetarian, so you must not give him any meat or fish. A high quality dry food like Living World's Extrusion or Classic food for guinea pigs will give him all the nutrients that he needs.

He should also have a constant source of hay for nibbling on and snuggling into. Make sure that you feed your guinea pig good quality hay that isn't dusty or musty-smelling. As well as putting some hay in your guinea pig's bedroom, put some in a hayrack on the wall of the hutch.

Fresh food

Unlike most animals, guinea pigs can't make their own vitamin C. Feed him small pieces of fresh food each day to make sure that he gets enough vitamin C. Don't give him too much though or it will give him diarrhoea. Make sure that you wash fresh fruit and vegetables and dry them before you give them to your guinea pig.

You can give your guinea pig small amounts of peas, spinach, broccoli, carrots, parsnips, swedes and apples. Don't give your guinea pig too much lettuce or cucumber as it could make him ill.

Notes to parents

Some plants are poisonous to guinea pigs and could kill them. These include bracken, ragwort, buttercup and laburnum. Raw potatoes and white or red cabbage will give your guinea pig tummy ache.

Regular feeding times

Your guinea pig will prefer to be fed at the same time every day. You can leave dry food in his hutch or cage until the next day. Fresh food should be served at breakfast and uneaten pieces removed at the end of the day so that it doesn't go rotten.

Supplements

Your guinea pig shouldn't need lots of supplements if you feed him a complete balanced diet like Living World Extruded Guinea Pig food, but a mineral block will provide some important nutrients and keep his teeth healthy. You could also give him Vitamin C supplements in his water.





TREATS AND TITBITS FOR YOUR GUINEA PIG

Hand feeding your guinea pig with treats and titbits will help you to tame him. He will begin to associate you and your hand with nice things instead of being scared of it.

Guinea pigs like sweet things, but don't give him any sweet or salty treats designed for humans as these are bad for him. Instead, give him treats made especially for guinea pigs such as Living World Guinea Pig Drops, which contain vitamin C to help keep your guinea pig healthy.

You could also give him Living World Puffs, Donuts, Vegies and Triangles, or cereal sticks like Living World's Guinea Pig Sticks, which are good for his teeth.

If you give your guinea pig too many treats he will become fat and unhealthy. If you have a fat guinea pig, feed him Living World's Extrusion food. This is full of healthy ingredients and is designed especially to prevent Guinea Pigs from only eating the bits of food that they like most. Selective feeding is another reason why they can get overweight.

TAMING AND HANDLING YOUR GUINEA PIG

Notes to parents:

Guinea pigs are generally very easy to handle and are unlikely to be aggressive.

However, as they can be shy, it is best to supervise your child until the guinea pig is tamed or he may become nervous.

Young children, in particular, should always be supervised until they are old enough to understand that cuddly-looking guinea pigs are not toys.

The early days

Let your guinea pig settle in during the first few days after you bring him home and don't try to pick him up. He will probably try to hide in his bedding at first because he is scared. Once his cage is familiar and smells of his scent he will feel more comfortable about getting to know you.

Guinea pigs can't see very well close up as their eyes are designed to see predators coming from a distance. Instead, they rely on their strong sense of smell and sensitive hearing. It is important that you are not noisy around your guinea pig or you will scare him. Also, wash your hands before you feed or handle him so that you get rid of any unfamiliar smells and let him get used to your own scent.

Taming your guinea pig

Once your guinea pig has been home for a few days, sit near his cage and talk to him so that he gets used to the sound of your voice. Let him smell your fingers so he starts to recognise you. Move slowly and gently so that you don't frighten him and offer him titbits so that he begins to see your hand as a friendly provider of treats.

Picking up your guinea pig

Don't try to pick up your guinea pig until a week after you have brought him home. By then, if you have spent time with him everyday, he should know who you are and be happy about being picked up.

Don't grab at your guinea pig's body or you will scare him. Put one hand under his body and the other one around his chest, just behind his front legs. Hold him gently, close to you so that he feels safe.





EXERCISE AND PLAY

Guinea pigs like to play during the day and at night. They need lots of exercise outside of their hutch or cage or they may get fat and bored.

Outdoor play

Your guinea pig will need a safe place to play outside. He can run really fast and so could escape if you let him play freely in the garden. Other animals might also attack him.

You should build a secure run with wire all the way around and over the top. It is also best if the run has a covered area where he can shelter if he wants to. Make sure that there is nothing sharp in the grass where you put the run.

Put the run in a shady place so that your guinea pig doesn't get sunburn or heatstroke. Don't forget that the sun moves, so an area of his run that is shady in the morning, probably won't be in the afternoon. If your guinea pig does get heatstroke, wrap him in a thick towel that has been soaked in cold water and then wrung out. Seek veterinary attention if condition does not improve.

Tunnels, boxes and wheels

Your guinea pig will enjoy running through tunnels and hiding in things. You could give him some Living World Logs or a Living World Log Cabin to keep him entertained.

Indoor play

Your guinea pig will need to play indoors during the winter. He will wriggle into small spaces, chew things and leave droppings everywhere so it may be best to build an indoor run or playpen. He can't climb so the sides don't need to be tall.

Keep cats, dogs and other pets out of the room while your guinea pig is playing inside and don't leave him alone when he is out of his cage or hutch. Guinea pigs have sensitive hearing so careful not to be too noisy when around them.

Exercise balls

If you haven't got time to get out your indoor run, you can still let your guinea pig out for some exercise in a Living World Exercise Ball. He can safely run around inside this ventilated ball and it is also a useful place to put him when you are cleaning out his cage.

Never leave your guinea pig to play in his exercise ball alone though, and keep him away from other pets and anything that he could fall off such as steps or stairs. Don't leave him rolling around in his ball for too long – ten to twenty minutes is plenty of time.

Remember that the ball is not a toy for you to play with. You must never throw or roll the ball when your guinea pig is in it.

Notes to parents

Ensure that all of your guinea pig's toys and tunnels are made from non-toxic substances. Check them regularly for sharp edges, weak points where pieces can be nibbled off and gaps where feet might get trapped. Although children will enjoy playing with your guinea pig, don't let them get overexcited and frighten him with fast movements, or be rough with him.

CARING FOR YOUR GUINEA PIG'S HEALTH

You should take your guinea pig to the vet if he is scratching a lot, has a runny nose or eyes, makes a wheezy noise when he is breathing and has lost his appetite. All of these are signs that he is not well. There are also some other things that you should look out for.

Your guinea pig's coat

Your guinea pig's fur is a good way of checking how well he is. If he has a sleek coat he is likely to be well, but if it is dull, ruffled or dirty it could be a sign that he is getting ill.





He will clean himself every day with his teeth and claws. You can help by combing him gently every week with a cat comb (a long-haired guinea pig will need combing every day). Your guinea pig will get used to this and will enjoy spending time with you. It will also give you a chance to check his skin for lumps, fleas, fur mites and wounds.

You may not be able to see the fleas, but look out for their droppings, which look like gritty black specks. Use a treatment that is safe for guinea pigs to get rid of them straight away.

Do not bath your guinea pig unless absolutely necessary and always ensure that an adult is with you when you bath your guinea pig.

Note to parents

If small mats and tangles appear in your guinea pig's coat, try to tease them apart with your fingers. Larger mats should be snipped out with scissors, but take care not to cut the skin.

Skin problems

If your guinea pig has patches of bald, scabby skin he could have mites, ringworm or certain other conditions, take your guinea pig to the vet so that he can be treated straightaway.

Constantly growing teeth

Your guinea pig's teeth grow constantly, so he needs to grind them down every day by gnawing. So that he doesn't nibble his cage, give your guinea pig nice things to gnaw on like wooden chews or Living World Sticks. These aren't just treats that he will enjoy, but are necessary to keep his teeth healthy.

If your guinea pig is dribbling or having eating problems, it's likely that he has problems with his teeth or they have become overgrown and need clipping by a vet.

Claws

Your guinea pig's claws must be clipped regularly so that they don't grow to long and start digging into his skin. Your vet will be able to clip them.

A clean bottom

Check your guinea pig's bottom every day. If it is dirty it is likely that he has got diarrhoea. This may be because he has eaten too much fresh food, so only feed him a complete dry guinea pig food until he is better. If it is very dirty, take him to the vet straight away for a check up.

