

Ask the Vet: Tips for Caring for Pet Guinea Pigs

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Guinea pigs are a familiar pet species in our country, but they are not exceedingly common. Information sources regarding their care must be chosen wisely to avoid preventable health disasters.

When you visit with your veterinarian to have your guinea pig examined, take a list of questions with you. Your veterinary team will focus on answering your questions from their experiences and by accessing unique veterinary references. Use of your veterinary team as a resource makes sense since everyone involved is focused on helping to keep your pet healthy.

Inappropriate living conditions and diet represent the most common causes for illness in pet guinea pigs. Housing can be relatively simple, yet it is not always easy to share your home with herbivores.

My two guinea pigs were housed in our living room during my childhood. In hindsight, my parents were very tolerant of hay, space occupancy, occasional odors and the cleanup maintenance demand. It helped that my mother was such an avid animal lover. Everyone enjoyed the amusing vocalizations, whistles and squeals from the guinea pigs, especially when the refrigerator door would be opened.

My guinea pigs were bedded with deep hay so that they could both eat it and tunnel in it. Many paper litters exist today that work nicely as shallow bedding and do not carry the odor or oil problems of wood shavings or chips.

Very nice pen arrangements with low slope ramps and multiple levels can be created with snap-together, washable walls. Wall height should be at least 10 inches, and tops are not required. Open air flow, protection from direct sunlight, and room temperatures between 65 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit are recommended. Guinea pigs have compact bodies, so overheating is a risk.

They are not particularly athletic, but enough area for walking about can ward off obesity, which can become a disease problem.

Solid flooring is recommended for several reasons. First, curled nails and small paws can become caught in wire mesh flooring, leading to painful injuries. Guinea pig paw surfaces are susceptible to ulceration from contact with rough floor surfaces and from obesity. Equally important is the dietary need for guinea pigs to eat the cecotropes — soft stool passed off and on throughout the day — that they produce. A solid floor helps to ensure that access to the cecotropes exists.

Sipper water bottles are recommended to prevent spilling of the water bowl. The sipper tube should be meticulously cleaned to prevent obstruction or fouling of the water from food stuff that the guinea pigs often leave in the end after eating. Use a ceramic crock to reduce dumping of food pellets and to prevent chewing of the food bowl. Plastic bowls are often chewed.

Food choices displayed in stores look appealing to the people who purchase them. However, guinea pigs are herbivores that require lots of roughage in the form of grass hay. Timothy hay is the top pick, but timothy mixed with clover makes a very good choice also. The foremost rule for feeding a guinea pig is to make grass hay available at all times. Guinea pigs are remarkably efficient at fiber digestion, but very poor at carbohydrate and fat digestion. Oats, other grains or cereals and seeds should be avoided. Fruits may be offered very minimally as rare treats, but might just as wisely be avoided.

Guinea pigs have a special requirement for dietary vitamin C. With daily consumption of handfuls of dark green leafy vegetables, slices of sweet peppers and carrots, the need for supplemental vitamin C is eliminated. Vitamin C is an unstable chemical, so its presence in manufactured pellets and water supplements cannot be relied upon.

By offering hay at all times and handfuls of clean, fresh vegetables daily, the need to feed pellets is minimized. If pellets are offered, then they should be the sort made from timothy and not from alfalfa, which is too high in mineral content. The mineral content of alfalfa increases the risk of urinary tract stone formation to which guinea pigs are susceptible.

Dietary preferences tend to form in young guinea pigs, so try to offer a variety of vegetables consistently to minimize pickiness. These should be cleaned as if for your own table. Good choices include: beet or carrot tops, spinach, Romaine lettuce, dandelion, parsley, basil, mustard or collard greens, bok choy, celery and fresh clover.

Inside a healthy guinea pig's mouth are 20 teeth that are all constantly growing. The hay and vegetable chewing activity wears these teeth down naturally when their occlusion is normal. Unfortunately, guinea pigs with either malocclusion or inappropriate diet will develop overgrowth of their teeth, requiring intervention or resulting in death. The importance of diet cannot be over emphasized.

Finally, guinea pigs are precocious with respect to early reproductive development. Females reach sexual maturity at two months of age and males at three months. Mating can take place effectively any time of the year. Unfortunately, females that are bred for the first time after seven months of age are at high risk for inability to deliver their young without surgical caesarean section. Also, grouped males often assert social pressure that is harmful. Individual housing and social interaction with you is best.