

GUINEA PIG CARE GUIDE

Owning and caring for guinea pigs can be great fun and very rewarding, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment.

Did you know that guinea pigs can live on average for 5 to 7 years?

To ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of your guinea pigs and to enable them to thrive you will need to:



Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



Guinea pigs can be curious and comical animals, but it is important to remember that they are prey animals and can be easily startled, providing them with a secure and spacious enclosure away from other animals and young children is important to make them feel comfortable. Guinea pigs require plenty of unbroken floor space on one level to keep them active and healthy. The amount of space you need to provide will depend on how many guinea pigs are in the herd, please see the table for our minimum size requirements.

Guinea pigs are sensitive to temperature changes and drafts, they should ideally be kept at temperatures of around 15°C which means that it is not suitable to keep them outdoors in the cold months (October – April). Guinea pigs benefit from being kept predominantly indoors with access to an outdoor enclosure or run on warm, dry days. Outdoor hutches can be used during the warmer months, providing they can be moved indoors to avoid cold, wet weather.

There are several popular indoor enclosures suitable for guinea pigs, such as C&C enclosures. These are popular due to their low cost, the benefit of being easily extendable and can be made into different shapes to fit into rooms. Many enclosures commonly available are not large enough for guinea pigs, please get in touch with the Small Animals Team for a list of suitable enclosures. For larger herds or where guinea pigs cannot be housed indoors over the winter months, converting a shed or playhouse can provide a safe area for your guinea pigs. The shed or playhouse should be secure, insulated with ventilation and natural light. Shed conversions can provide a dedicated space for guinea pigs whilst being easier to clean than hutches and allow you to spend more

Number of guinea pigs	Minimum required area (across one level)
A pair or trio e.g. 2 boars 2 sows 2 sows & 1 neutered boar 3 sows	10.5sqft or 170cm x 61cm
3 boars 3 sows & 1 neutered boar 4 sows	13sqft or 200cm x 61cm
4 sows & 1 neutered boar 5 sows	16sqft or 243cm x 61cm
For any additional guinea pigs, add an extra 3sqft or 90cm ² of floor space per guinea pig	



time with your guinea pigs, even in poor weather. Enclosures with steep ramps should be avoided as guinea pigs are not good climbers and can injure themselves from falls.

A secure run, measuring 6ft x 3ft (180cm x 90cm), can be provided on dry, warm days to allow your guinea pigs additional exercise and grazing opportunities. Predator proof runs can be bought or constructed at home using good quality wood and 12–16-gauge welded mesh (not chicken wire) and should have a sturdy lid. We recommend only using runs when the guinea pigs are supervised to reduce the risks from predators.

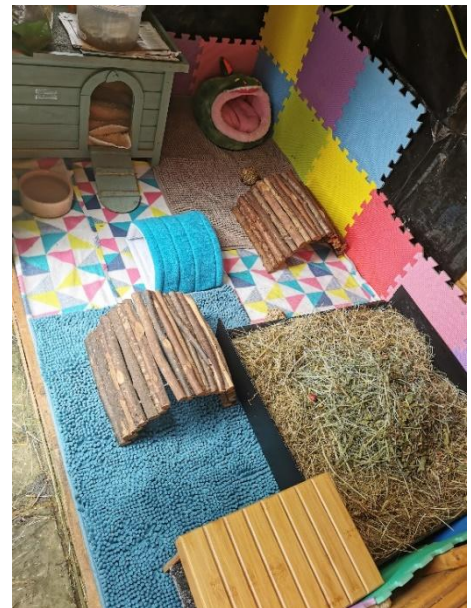
Different forms of enrichment should be provided to keep your guinea pigs feeling safe and stimulated, these can include different hides, bridges, tunnels and feeding toys. Guinea pigs should not be provided with exercise wheels or put in exercise balls as these can damage their limbs and backs. Guinea pigs are not the tidiest of animals, they require daily spot cleaning and a weekly deep clean. Providing litter trays full of hay can help to contain some of the mess however most guinea pigs cannot be fully litter trained.



Bedding recommendations:

- Fleece or towels
- Hay - dust extracted and good quality, should smell fresh
- Shredded cardboard e.g. EcoBale and Bedkind
- Paper-based bedding e.g. Back 2 Nature, Carefresh
- Kiln-dried, dust extracted wood chip bedding e.g., Pillow Wad
- Plant-based bedding e.g., Aubiose, Megazorb

We recommend avoiding most wood shavings or sawdust products as these are known to cause respiratory, fungal, and liver issues. Fluffy cotton wool style bedding should not be used as it can cause blockages if ingested and can get tangled around limbs. Please also avoid purchasing enrichment made of compressed wood shavings as these are dangerous if consumed. If you would like any recommendations, please contact the Small Animals Team. Is your property rented? If so, we will need to see permission from your landlord that you are allowed to keep small animals.



Preserve their health by protecting them from pain, injury, and disease



Finding a guinea pig-savvy vet may require some research as guinea pigs are considered exotic pets. We suggest checking that your vet is experienced in treating guinea pigs or seeking a specialist exotic veterinary practice.

Check your guinea pigs for signs of injury or illness every day and seek veterinary advice if necessary.

- Check teeth and nails are not becoming overgrown
- Check eyes are clear and bright
- Check coat and skin for signs of mites, bald patches, sores, or lumps
- Check nose is free from discharge and breathing is clear
- Check for a clean and dry bottom
- Check for signs of impaction (predominantly in male guinea pigs)

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- Monitor faeces and urine for any changes from the norm
- Check for normal movement (no limping etc)
- Long haired breeds will require frequent grooming to prevent matting



Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



Guinea pigs are herbivores and can consume their body size in food a day. Their diet consists of 85% hay, 5% good quality pellets and 10% fresh vegetables.

The diet should consist of:

- **Hay:** the best diet consists almost entirely of good quality hay and dried grass forages; an unlimited amount of hay should be available at all times. They love to graze and will choose the best strands of hay to consume, old hay should be removed daily and replaced with fresh. Not all hays are created equal; there are different qualities and types of hay available including meadow, timothy, oat, orchard, and alfalfa. Meadow hay is ideal for bedding and litter trays as it is cheap and palatable, timothy hay is the best feeding hay as it is very tasty and more fibrous to help keep teeth trim. Oat and orchard hays can be provided alongside feeding hays as an additional treat. Alfalfa should only be provided to poorly, young, or pregnant/lactating mothers due to the high calcium and protein content. Guinea pig's teeth grow continuously throughout their life and chewing hay or grass is the best way to keep their teeth short.
- **Pellets:** good quality guinea pig pellets with grass or hay as the main ingredient can be provided daily, we recommend 2tbsp per guinea pig daily. Muesli mixes should be avoided as they often contain unsafe and unhealthy ingredients and promote selective feeding.
- **Fresh vegetables and fruits:** a small handful per guinea pig of fresh leafy herbs and greens, celery and bell peppers is important to provide them with enough vitamins and minerals to keep them healthy. Guinea pigs cannot produce their own vitamin C which plays an important part in immune systems and maintaining bone condition, so they rely on the fresh part of their diet for this vitamin. Natural forage such as willow and hazel branches are great for guinea pig's teeth, and safe washed weeds such as dandelion, sow thistle and red clover can be a tasty alternative to fresh vegetables. Please be careful when picking weeds as some plants are toxic to guinea pigs. Many lettuces are safe for guinea pigs including romaine, butterhead and little gem, however, iceberg lettuce should be avoided. Safe fruits can be provided occasionally as treats but too many sugary fruit and vegetables can lead to obesity and kidney problems. If you would like a list of safe vegetables, fruits, and weeds, please contact the Small Animals Team.
- **Fresh water:** should always be available and changed daily. Providing water in a heavy ceramic bowl is recommended rather than water bottles, as bowls are more hygienic, allow for more efficient drinking and are less likely to leak or malfunction.
- **Treats:** Commercial treats can be high in sugar or contain unsafe or unhealthy ingredients, these should be avoided to reduce the risk of obesity and diabetes in your guinea pigs. The best commercial treats should have hay, grasses, or weeds as their main ingredients. Any treats with seeds and honey should be avoided.





Guinea pigs are social animals and would naturally live in large herds, so it is important that they have companionship from their own kind. If you are looking for a companion for your guinea pig, Raystede provides bonding guides and a bonding service please ask the Small Animals Team for more information. The most stable bonds are between multiple sows, or one or more sows with one neutered boar. Bonded pairs of boars can work in many cases however we recommend pairing boars based on their personalities as some individuals are more tolerant of other boars. Trios or larger herds of boars should be avoided as they can become territorial and fight, which requires permanent separation. Guinea pigs are not suited to living with other small animals such as rabbits, chinchillas, or poultry due to the risks of zoonotic diseases and the risk of injuries. It is normal within herds to have dominant and subordinate individuals, normal interactions can consist of mounting, teeth chatting, rumble strutting, and grooming.



As prey animals, guinea pigs are naturally fearful of potential predators, loud noises, and sudden movements. To make them feel secure in their new home, they require enrichment such as multiple hides, wooden bridges, tunnels, and big piles of hay so they can hide if they become scared. For this reason, nervous guinea pigs may not be suited to live with younger families as they require a calmer environment to gain confidence and express their natural behaviours. Enrichment can be homemade from cardboard boxes, tubes or treats in paper bags. As guinea pigs are not good climbers, enrichment should be floor level and easily accessible. Safe wooden enrichment items are ideal as they can help keep teeth trim and edible toys made from willow, water hyacinth and grasses are readily accepted.



Guinea pigs are grazers and spend much of their time foraging for tasty snacks. Scatter-feeding or providing shallow litter trays filled with hay and dried forages or treats can provide hours of entertainment. Encouraging stretching and moving by placing safe branches or treats higher up can help to keep your guinea pigs active and avoid weight problems. Planting safe grasses and plants can provide more grazing opportunities, these can be hand-cut and scattered around the enclosure, put in feeding enrichment, or the pots can be introduced to their enclosures or runs to allow self-grazing.

Additional areas for exercise such as outdoor runs or indoor playpens can provide a safe space for exercise outside of their normal enclosure. Pop up ball pits or puppy play pens can make safe exercise areas for indoors and well-built runs with lids can be used outdoors.

We recommend letting guinea pigs settle for a few weeks before starting the handling process. Beginning low to the ground or sitting within the run or enclosure is a good idea, it allows your guinea pigs to gain confidence with handling while keeping them safe should they run away. Guinea pigs are naturally wary animals so it is normal for guinea pigs to run away when you approach them, however, many can be comfortable sitting on your lap to eat treats. Children should always be supervised and guided during handling to ensure that it is gentle and safe. Ensure that when handling you fully support their whole body with one hand under their chest and the other hand supporting their rear, holding them against your body for extra security.