

Guinea Pig Information Sheet



Summary

- Guinea pigs are a species of rodent originating from South America. They are popular pets due to their placid, friendly nature.
- They are herbivores, meaning they eat only plant material, and are more specifically known as 'fibrevores' due to the high-fibre content of their diet (i.e. mostly hay).
- Guinea pigs are a prey species, meaning they are easily stressed, which should be taken into consideration when caring for them as pets.
- They are also herd animals, meaning they need to live in groups of at least 2. Single guinea pigs become lonely and stressed, and their health is often affected as a result.
- The average lifespan for guinea pigs is 4-7 years, although some may live until 8-9 years.

Diet

An appropriate diet is hugely important for a guinea pig's overall health. An improper diet can directly lead to the following common health problems: dental disease, bladder stones/sludge, vitamin C deficiency, gut stasis, diarrhoea, and obesity.

Key considerations for a guinea pig diet are the need for high amounts of fibre in the form of good quality hay, and a high vitamin C content. Guinea pigs cannot synthesise their own vitamin C, and deficiency is a common condition associated with multiple health issues.

80% of a guinea pig's diet should consist of good quality hay, either meadow or timothy. Guinea pigs should have constant access to unlimited amounts of hay. Hay helps wear down a guinea pig's constantly growing teeth, keeping them an appropriate length. It is also crucial for maintaining gut health - the guinea pig's digestive system relies on large amounts of fibre to function properly. Consequences of low-fibre diets include diarrhoea, bloat, and gut stasis (a life-threatening condition where the guts stop moving).

A high-quality pellet diet specific for guinea pigs should be provided, but should only make up about 10% of the diet. Pellets have added vitamin C. Guinea pigs cannot synthesise vitamin C and therefore need high amounts in their diet to prevent deficiency (scurvy).

Only 1 tablespoon of pellets per pig per day is recommended - more than this can lead to obesity and other health issues. Muesli-type foods should NOT be used, as they promote selective eating and can lead to overgrown teeth, obesity, and nutritional deficiencies. Vitamin C degrades in sunlight, so food should be kept in opaque containers or their original bag sealed shut.

Fresh veg/greens should be provided daily, approximately 1 cup per pig, made up of different foods. Variety is important to prevent negative effects of overfeeding a certain kind of food, while still benefiting from their nutritional properties. E.g. dark leafy greens and fresh herbs such as parsley are high in calcium, which can lead to urinary problems if given in excess, however these same foods are also very high in vitamin C, which is desirable.

Some veg e.g. peppers can be safely fed every day, as they are high in vitamin C, but low in sugar and calcium.

Fruit and high-sugar vegetables such as corn and carrots should only be fed as a very occasional treat. The high sugar content can lead to gut bacteria imbalances and obesity.

The chart below is a useful guide:

Safe veg and greens for guinea pigs

Give each guinea pig one cup of fresh food daily a part of a balanced diet.
Give small amounts of at least 5-6 different veg/greens, including some high in vitamin C.

Garden greens

- Apple leaves and twigs
- Pear leaves and twigs
- Bramble/blackberry leaves
- Calendula (marigolds)
- Chamomile
- Chickweed
- Cleavers
- Clover
- Dandelion
- Herb Robert
- Lavender
- Mallow
- Dried or dead nettles (fresh can sting)
- Plantain
- Sow thistle
- Strawberry or raspberry leaves
- Willow leaves and twigs
- Yarrow

Vegetables

- Artichoke leaves
- Asparagus*
- Baby corn on cob
- Beetroot
- Bell peppers*
- Broccoli* (too much can cause gas)
- Brussel sprouts (too much can cause gas)
- Cabbage (dark green varieties)
- Carrot tops
- Cauliflower leaves and stalks
- Celery leaves
- Chicory
- Collard greens
- Courgette (and flowers)
- Cucumber (too much can cause diarrhoea)
- Green beans
- Kale*
- Lettuce (not iceberg)
- Pak Choi/Bok Choi
- Parsley*
- Parsnips
- Peas – leaves and pods
- Red cabbage
- Rocket
- Romaine lettuce
- Savoy cabbage
- Spinach*
- Spring greens*
- Swiss chard
- Tomato* (not leaves/vine, as poisonous)
- Watercress

* High in vitamin C

Herbs

- Basil
- Coriander
- Dill
- Mint
- Oregano
- Rosemary
- Sage
- Thyme

PDSA's Pet Health Hub: www.pdsa.org.uk/phh

(PDSA 2025)

If your guinea pig is at high risk of developing bladder stones, you may be advised to reduce the level of calcium in their diet. The following table created by the Royal Veterinary College can be used for guidance on the calcium content of specific fresh foods:

(Royal Veterinary College 2025)

Low calcium foods – feed often but ensure a variety eaten every day	Medium calcium food – feed occasionally	High calcium foods – avoid feeding
Tomato (4mg)	Cabbage (26-28mg)	Rocket (108mg)
Bell pepper (5mg)	Coriander (33.5mg)	Spring greens (105mg)
Cucumber (8mg)	Kale (65mg)	Basil (125mg)
Cauliflower (8.5mg)	Spinach (85mg)	Dill (170mg)
Radish (9.5mg)	Watercress (85mg)	Rosemary (185mg)
Chicory (10.5mg)	Dandelion (93.5mg)	Thyme (315mg)
Fennel (12mg)	Parsley (100mg)	
Carrot (13mg)		
Romaine lettuce (16.5mg)		
Pak Choi (20mg)		
Celery (20mg)		
Parsnip (20.5mg)		
Mint (21mg)		
Broccoli (23.5mg)		
Chard (25.5mg)		
Green beans (26mg)		

If your guinea pigs are fed a balanced diet with a variety of greens/veg and appropriate nuggets containing vitamin C, you should not need to supplement this in their diet. However, older guinea pigs, pregnant guinea pigs, or those with illnesses may need additional supplementation. Drops added to the water are not recommended, as vitamin C degrades with exposure to sunlight, and the taste may put your guinea pig off drinking. Powders which can be sprinkled onto food are best, e.g. Vetark Pro-C, which also contains probiotics to support gut health (Vetark 2025). These should be stored as with pellets, and not used after the expiry date.

Housing

Guinea pigs require large enclosures. Often, cages marketed for guinea pigs are not suitable as they do not meet the minimum space requirements. Many people choose to build custom cages from C&C grids to ensure their guinea pigs have adequate room.

Ideally, guinea pigs require approx. 1 square meter per guinea pig, meaning a pair of guinea pigs would require a cage which provides at least 2 square meters of space (Schembri 2024).

Guinea pig cages are generally large, single level cages. They do not need to climb. Double-story hutches with built-in ramps pose a risk of fall-injuries, but c&c cages can be adapted to incorporate a 'loft' area, accessed by a gentle sloping ramp covered with fleece or other appropriate material for grip. The ramp should have sides to avoid falls. This is a good way of providing additional space for guinea pigs within their cage.

The floor of the cage should be solid, and covered with an appropriate substrate. Sawdust is not recommended as it is dusty and can lead to respiratory issues. Recycled paper

pulp/cardboard type beddings are recommended, or fleece laid over an absorbent under-layer.

Guinea pigs need places to hide due to their prey instincts. There should be at least 1 hiding place per pig to avoid arguments and allow them to be alone if they wish, but hiding places should also be large enough that more than 1 pig can fit in if they choose to be together.

Proper ventilation is crucial to help prevent respiratory diseases, which are common in guinea pigs. Dust irritates the airways and can trigger respiratory infections. In addition to ventilation, using dust-extracted bedding and hay is important. Ammonia (produced in urine) can also irritate airways, as guinea pigs are low to the ground causing them to breathe it in. Regular cage cleaning (at least once a week), ventilation, and ensuring adequate cage space can help reduce build-up.

Strict cage hygiene, appropriate bedding and adequate cage size are all important factors in preventing other diseases such as pododermatitis (bumblefoot), flystrike, and urinary infections.

Guinea pigs are particularly sensitive to temperature and humidity levels, and can become unwell if these are not appropriate, or if sudden changes occur.

The preferred humidity range is around 40-60% (low humidity), and a preferred temperature range between 17-22 degrees. While guinea pigs can live outdoors, temperatures dropping below 10 degrees are generally considered too low.

Cages should be placed in a draft free area. If guinea pigs are outside, their enclosure should be properly weatherproofed (e.g. a waterproof cover to protect from rain, hutches raised off the ground to help prevent damp, extra bedding in an enclosed hiding area, and pet-safe heat pads for use in cold weather).

If guinea pigs are housed in a shed or outbuilding, this should be adapted to provide proper ventilation (installing windows with mesh covers to keep predators out, and installing ventilation panels for use during cold or wet weather), insulation, and ideally a means of heating and cooling in extreme weather. Sheds can get very hot in the summer, and guinea pigs may need to be moved indoors during extremely hot or cold weather. If guinea pigs are housed in a shed, it should be used only for them and not for storage e.g. of chemicals which may be harmful.

Guinea pigs who are used to living indoors should not be moved outdoors, and vice versa, with the exception of moving outdoor guinea pigs indoors during extreme temperatures.

Enrichment

The most important aspects of enrichment for guinea pigs are companionship and space. Some guinea pigs will play and interact with toys or other items in their cage, but many will just ignore them! As long as guinea pigs have companionship and enough space, time outside the cage to exercise, enough hiding places, and an appropriately balanced diet, they

may be perfectly happy without toys.

Some guinea pigs enjoy an empty toilet roll tube filled with hay/forage.

Exercise

Guinea pig cages should be large enough to offer them plenty of room to exercise, and they should be given regular floor-time indoors or put in a secure run outside (ensuring grass has not been sprayed with any chemicals and any potentially harmful plants are removed).

Companionship

Guinea pigs should not be housed with rabbits under any circumstances. This is due to the fact that rabbits can be carriers of certain respiratory infections, which may not cause any symptoms in the rabbit, but may be fatal to the guinea pig. Rabbits can also accidentally cause serious injury to guinea pigs, and they have different dietary requirements which means they cannot be fed the same pellet food.

Guinea pigs should be kept in groups of at least 2. A trio is often a happy number for them. If keeping male and female guinea pigs together, neutering is essential to prevent pregnancies. It is easier and less invasive to neuter a male guinea pig, unless there is a medical reason for a female e.g. ovarian cysts. A neutered male/female pair or group often works well (with only 1 male per group), or a pair/group of females.

Males can be kept together occasionally e.g. if they are litter-mates, but fighting is a common problem and generally this is not recommended. Neutering males does not necessarily change their behaviour either, so this is not a fix for the issue. Once fighting has occurred, guinea pigs normally need to be separated for life and re-paired with alternative companions.

Female guinea pigs can also fight and bully, although it is generally less serious than male fighting which can cause severe wounds and injuries. Any introductions should be done gradually e.g. side-by-side cages, short meetings in neutral territory etc.

Common Behaviours

As mentioned earlier, Guinea pigs are very social creatures and need to have at least one other friend to have a happy life. They are also very vocal and love to communicate! Here are some common behaviours and what they can mean:

- **‘Popcorning’** – this is when a happy guinea pig suddenly jumps into the air, and is a positive behaviour.
- **Wheaking/squeaking**- guinea pigs will squeak when they are happy, and will also squeak when they are unhappy, but when you get to know your guinea pig you will learn to differentiate between the two! Usually, they will squeak when waiting for food or when they see you if they haven’t seen you for a while!
- **Grooming**- this is a very positive behaviour if they are grooming each other.
- **Teeth chattering** – they will do this if they are threatened or angry. They may do this

to communicate to each other, or to you if you are doing something they don't like.

- **Chasing each other** – this can be a negative behaviour if they are constantly chasing each other.
- **Biting or fighting** – If they start to fight, they need to be separated.

Handling, grooming and healthcare

Guinea pigs may find handling stressful due to being prey species. When picking your guinea pig up, never grab them from above as this mimics being caught by a predator. You should approach them from the side so they can see you and are not startled. Avoid loud noises and sudden movements. Speaking in low tones lets them know you are there without scaring them.

Lift them up by sliding your hands underneath their body and hold them close to your body, with one hand under their hindquarters and one hand around their upper body. This supports their spine, minimises the risk of them panicking and jumping out of your grip, and makes them feel secure.

Guinea pigs should never be placed on their back - their spines are very delicate and can be injured easily. This position is also likely to make them panic, increasing the risk of injury.

Guinea pigs need regular nail trims to avoid discomfort and injuries. You can either do this at home, or bring them to the veterinary clinic for a nurse to do this for you. You can also ask them to show you how to do this at home in future.

We recommend trimming your guinea pig's nails every 3-4 weeks, but some may need doing more frequently.

Long-haired guinea pigs will need to be groomed regularly and have their fur trimmed, particularly around their back end, to avoid it getting soiled with urine and faeces. Their fur may need to be trimmed all over in the summer to prevent them getting too hot.

We recommend regularly weighing your guinea pig with digital kitchen scales so that any weight loss can be recognised quickly.

When handling your guinea pig, you should give them a 'health check' to recognise any health issues promptly:

- Check the length of their nails, and check feet for any sores
- Their eyes should be bright, open and clear of any crust/discharge.
- Their nose should also be clean and free of crust/discharge, and their breathing should be quiet without any wheezing/rasping sounds.
- Check their bottom and genital area - there should be no soft faeces, urine soaked fur, sores or bad smell.

- Check their coat for any areas of thinning fur, bald patches, or scabs/crusty areas on their skin.
- Feel for any lumps and bumps.
- Feel over your guinea pig's spine, hips and ribs - healthy guinea pigs normally have a layer of fat over these areas meaning their bones cannot be felt easily. Some guinea pigs, particularly older ones, may naturally have less fat over these areas. This is not always a concern, but it is a good idea to become familiar with how your guinea pig normally feels, and note any changes.

When carrying out your checks of their bottom area, it is worth noting that older male guinea pigs can develop looser perineal sacks (the area around the bottom). As it gets looser with age, soft pellets can get stuck in this area and cause an impaction. We recommend to check this area regularly and gently clean with dampened cotton wool to remove any old faeces.

Common Health Problems

Unfortunately, there are some health issues that can arise for your guinea pig, and catching any signs early will aid their recovery. Most of these common health problems are preventable, and prevention is better than cure! By carrying out health checks regularly (as mentioned above), any signs of ill health are more likely to be seen early.

Dental Issues – As mentioned earlier, guinea pigs have open-rooted teeth that continually grow throughout their life. As they chew and grind their teeth to eat their hay or grass, their molars are naturally worn down. However, if they do not eat enough fibrous material, their teeth can continue to grow and either grow towards their tongue, or their cheeks, causing painful ulcers to form, leading to anorexia, then to gastrointestinal stasis.

To prevent this, we recommend to constantly feed lots of hay. Guinea pigs should at least eat enough hay as big as their body size a day! Some guinea pigs prefer different hay types, so you can try different hay options, for example Timothy Hay (a lot tougher so great for wearing down teeth) orchard grass or meadow hay (this is softer but should still do the job if they eat enough).

Signs of dental issues to watch for:

- Drooling/crustiness around mouth
- Selective feeding – only eating softer foods, eating less hay than usual, leaving food behind that they would normally eat
- Dropping food while eating
- Teeth grinding
- Weight loss
- Eye discharge or nasal discharge

If you notice any of these signs, take your guinea pig to the vet for a dental assessment – the vet will look inside their mouth and advise on next steps. Some will require a general anaesthetic to wear the teeth down.

Sometimes their teeth can also continue to grow downwards into the jaw, causing elongated roots. This can sometimes cause dental abscesses to form which are painful pus-filled lumps

on the bottom or upper jaw which will affect the eyes and nose. This requires an x-ray to diagnose. This sadly cannot be cured, but can sometimes be managed.

Gastrointestinal issues:

Gut stasis - Guinea pigs need to constantly eat to keep their gut moving. If they are anorexic or eating less than usual, their gastrointestinal tract slows down and then stops completely. If the gut stops moving, bacteria can overgrow and cause a build-up of gas, which can lead to bloat which is extremely painful. **This is an emergency and requires veterinary treatment straight away.** If left untreated, this condition can be fatal. If you notice your guinea pig:

- Eating less/not eating at all
- Acting lethargic/sitting in the same spot for hours
- Producing little/no poos
- Showing signs of pain (teeth grinding/squeaking)

Take them to the vet - the sooner they are treated, the likelihood of a better outcome is higher. Guinea pigs do not usually just stop eating, so gut stasis is a sign of an underlying health concern that caused them to stop eating in the first place. Finding the cause is also as important as treating the stasis itself.

Diarrhoea – If your guinea pig is producing very soft or liquid poos, this can become extremely serious as they can become dehydrated very quickly. This can be caused by parasites, infection or a sudden diet change. If you notice this, take your guinea pig to the vet straight away.

To avoid any tummy upsets if changing their diet, mix a small amount of their new diet in with their old diet first and then increase the amount of the new food daily until they are on just the new food. This should take place over at least 2 weeks, or longer if your guinea pig has a sensitive tummy. This also applies to any new vegetables – offer a very small amount if they are having it for the first time and monitor their poos afterwards. We recommend to try only one new vegetable at a time so if they have an upset tummy, it is easier to work out what caused it.

Skin Issues – Guinea pigs can develop the following signs that signify a skin issue:

- Flaking/scaling
- Hair loss
- Scabbing
- Excessive itching
- Rashes
- Redness

There are many things that can cause skin issues, for example flea/mite/lice infestation which requires topical treatment (sometimes multiple treatments are required) and extensive cleaning and disinfection of their enclosure. Other causes can be overgrooming due to stress, skin infections, ringworm or sometimes underlying hormonal causes (ovarian cysts in females). We do recommend a trip to the vets to diagnose the cause.

Eye Issues – Eye issues can be caused by a multitude of things, for example hay poke, infections or ulcers – all things that will require veterinary treatment. If your guinea pig shows any of the following signs, they require a trip to the vets straight away.

Monitor for any of these signs:

- Eye discharge
- Redness
- Squinting
- Bulging
- Cloudiness

Breathing Issues – Guinea pigs are obligate nasal breathers, so if you ever see your guinea pig open mouth breathing, it is an emergency. Other signs of breathing concerns include:

- Fast breathing
- Increased effort – this is when your guinea pig is also using their abdominal muscles to breath as they are struggling.
- Nasal discharge – this can impact or even prevent them from breathing through their nose.
- Wheezing
- Sneezing

Any breathing concerns should be reported to your vet straight away.

Bladder Issues – If you notice your guinea pig:

- Straining to urinate
- Weeing multiple times in a short period but only producing little amounts at a time
- Squeaking while urinating
- Urinating blood/bloody urine

They require a visit to the vets straight away. They may have cystitis, or potentially a bladder stone, which is extremely painful.

Ovarian Cysts – Unfortunately, entire female guinea pigs can develop ovarian cysts as they get a bit older, which can cause:

- Hair loss on both sides of their lower body – it will appear symmetrical
- Weight 'gain' – your guinea pig may look larger around the rear and appear to have gained weight, but this could be ovarian cysts taking up more room in the abdomen.
- Abdominal pain – squeaking when being handled, signs of pain when sitting alone (teeth grinding/inactivity)
- Lethargy
- Poor appetite
- Crusty nipples

This also requires a trip to the vet, as it will not get better on its own. The vet is likely to recommend surgery to remove the ovaries.

References

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Other useful resources

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

<https://uk.kavee.com/blogs/the-piggy-blog>

<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/pet-help-and-advice/looking-after-your-pet/small-pets>