

# Pet Guinea Pigs

GENERAL CARE SHEET



# AMC

Animal Medical Center

SINCE 1910

# Pet Guinea Pigs General Care Sheet

Native to the Andes Mountains of South America, Guinea pigs are rodents that are common pets in the United States. Also called cavies, there are several common breeds including the Abyssinian (rough, short coat with cowlicks), the American/ English (classic shorthair) and the Peruvian (longhair). Guinea pigs are herbivores and need to feed continuously, therefore they produce fecal pellets continuously. Like rabbits, guinea pigs will form softer stools called cecotropes that they will ingest throughout the day. Guinea pigs typically live 5-8 years and are very social animals that do well in pairs or trios. It is important to note that guinea pigs and rabbits should not be housed together as rabbits can carry bacteria called *Bordetella Bronchiseptica* which, while usually harmless to rabbits, can be fatal to guinea pigs.

## Caging

A plastic bottom wire cage with paper product bedding is advised (such as CareFresh®). Another creative and fun option is to make a cubes and coroplast or “CC” cage. These allow for more options with ramps, hides, multi-levels, tunnels, and environmental enrichment. A water bottle or a bowl should be placed in the cage. The dishes should be cleaned with soap and water often. Water bottles should be cleaned weekly with special attention to cleaning out the sipper tube itself with cotton tipped applicators and by placing it in boiling water.

## Nutrition

### Recommended daily diet

- Fresh Timothy hay (50% of diet)
  - Hay should be offered freely at all times.
  - 2nd cutting Timothy hay is usually preferred however 1st cutting Timothy hay is OK to feed.
  - Trusted brands of hay include Oxbow and Farmer Dave’s Pet Supply.
  - Alfalfa hay should ONLY be fed to young or pregnant guinea pigs as its calcium content is too high for adults and can result in urinary tract problems.
- High fiber Guinea pig pellets
  - Only varieties formulated specifically for guinea pigs will have the necessary vitamin C.
  - Do not feed mixes with seeds or grains as these can lead to obesity and dental disease.
  - Buy fresh pellets every 60-90 days as the Vitamin C content does not remain stable for longer than that time frame.
  - Recommended brands include Oxbow and Sherwood Pet Health pellets.
- Fresh vegetables and fruits
  - Leafy greens including romaine lettuce and red/green leaf lettuce mixes.
  - Vegetables such as red bell peppers, celery, cucumber, broccoli, and green beans.

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- Herbs such as dill, basil, rosemary and oregano can be offered 1-2 times weekly in small amounts.
  - Occasional carrot pieces (avoid baby carrots due to high sugar content).
  - Fruits should be limited to treats: strawberry, blueberry, citrus, and apples.
  - AVOID high calcium/oxalate vegetables: spinach, kale, parsley, dandelion greens.
  - AVOID high sugar fruits such as bananas and grapes.
  - Introduce all new fresh foods slowly and gradually to avoid intestinal upset.
- Vitamin C
    - Supplementation is not usually necessary if the pet is on a healthy pellet including one of the brands recommended above.
    - AVOID supplementing vitamins in the water.
    - Vitamin C supplementation may be warranted during times of illness.

## Common Diseases and Health Problems

- Scurvy (Vitamin C deficiency)
  - Young, growing pigs and sick pigs are the most susceptible.
  - The most important aspect of this disease is that the pet needs to be on a healthy diet including a good quality pellet as well as fresh vegetables.
  - Symptoms can include a poor hair coat, painful joints, foot sores, and trouble eating.
- Gastrointestinal Disease/Dental disease
  - GI problems are often secondary to a poor diet or dental disease.
  - Signs of dental disease include decreased appetite, drooling, unkempt hair coat, and grinding the teeth.
  - A guinea pig that is not eating/defecating for over 12 hours should be evaluated immediately.
- Hair, skin and foot disease
  - Stress, boredom, or parasites can cause over-grooming behavior.
  - Mites and ringworm are common problems in guinea pigs. These can be extremely painful/itchy and may even cause seizures.
  - Pressure sores on the feet are seen in older guinea pigs. Obesity, Vitamin C deficiency, and wire-bottom cages are usually pre-disposing factors. These sores can lead to severe infections in the bones, joints, and kidneys.
  - Examine the bottom of their feet once weekly and look for any abnormalities.
- Respiratory Disease
  - Symptoms can include nasal or ocular discharge, sneezing, abnormal breathing or weight loss.
  - Respiratory disease is often due to bacterial pathogens. Other causes include cardiac disease, viruses, or aspiration.

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- Reproductive Issues
  - Sexual maturity arrives early in guinea pigs. Females are able to breed at 4-6 weeks old and males at 9-10 weeks old.
  - Female guinea pigs that were not bred before 6 months of age will likely have complications giving birth later in life.
  - Intact females are prone to mammary and uterine cancer later in life.
  - Intact boars (males) may be prone to fecal impactions later in life and may require assistance in cleaning out their rectal pouch.
  - Intact female guinea pigs have a high incidence of ovarian cysts.
- Urinary Issues
  - Urinary sediment or stones can be seen in guinea pigs with high calcium/oxalate diets (excessive alfalfa hay or high calcium/oxalate vegetables).
  - Symptoms include bloody urine, straining, vocalization while urinating/defecating, and hunched posture. This can be a life-threatening situation.

## Recommended Veterinary Care

- Yearly Physical Exams
- Dental examination
- Weight determination with veterinarian
- Review diet / husbandry with veterinarian
- Nail trim every 1-2 months

**Please call the Animal Medical Center at (212) 838-8100  
to schedule an appointment with the Exotics Service.**

Note: Our Emergency Room is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and is equipped to see Exotics patients.