



Brook-Falls  
Veterinary Hospital  
& Exotic Care Inc.



## Guinea Pig Care Quick Guide

### Husbandry & Diet Information **Fast facts about Guinea Pigs**

- ❖ Lifespan: average 4-8 years
- ❖ When guinea pigs get excited, they may “popcorn” or repeatedly perform little hops in the air while squeaking happily
- ❖ Guinea pigs have a digestive tract adapted for digesting large amounts of fiber that is required in their diets. Their digestion more closely resembles a horse than a dog or cat!
- ❖ Like rodents, guinea pig teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. They may need periodic trimming by your veterinarian if their occlusion is abnormal.
- ❖ When baby guinea pigs are born they are very well developed with a full hair coat, open eyes, and a full set of teeth!

### Enclosure

#### Cage/exercise area:

Common guinea pig enclosures sold at pet stores do not offer enough space for them to get the exercise they need. Guinea pigs need plenty of space to roam and exercise even if they are offered daily playtime outside of their cage. As a general rule follow this chart:

| # Of Guinea Pigs Housed Together | Minimum Space Required     | Preferred Space                     |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1                                | 7.5 square feet (30"x36")  | At least 10.5 square feet (30"x50") |
| 2                                | 7.5 square feet (30"x36")  | At least 10.5 square feet (30"x50") |
| 3                                | 10.5 square feet (30"x50") | At least 13 square feet (30"x62")   |
| 4                                | 13 square feet (30"x62")   | At least 16 square feet (30"x76")   |

\*Keep in mind that guinea pigs are very social animals. They usually do much better with another guinea pig friend!

Make sure the sides of the enclosure are at least 12" high to prevent escape. The top of the cage may be open for easier cleaning and access if there are no other animals in the household that have access to it.

Glass aquariums, plastic tubs, and cages with wire floors are NOT acceptable as housing. Plastic and glass enclosures do not offer enough ventilation and guinea pigs are already prone to respiratory issues. Cages with wire floors may seem easier to clean but can cause a lot of trauma on their sensitive feet.

There are some websites that offer guinea pig cages that are pre-built such as <https://www.guineapigcagesstore.com/>

The cages they offer are called “C&C” cages. These are made from attachable grid materials that can be customized to change the size and shape of the cage. The bottom of the cage is usually made from

coroplast, which is a corrugated plastic. This material is safe as there are no spaces for feet to get stuck and can be wiped down easily while cleaning. They also offer an option to buy a top to the cage.

C&C cages can also be a DIY project. The coroplast and cubes can be purchased at stores such as the Home Depot or Menards. When buying the grids, or cubes, make sure the width of the grid space is small enough so that your guinea pigs cannot get their head through, if they get stuck it could cause severe damage.

While other small mammals use vertical space to jump/climb, this is not needed for guinea pigs. They rely solely on the floor space available to them and do not need more than one floor.

Paper or fleece bedding is preferred. These bedding types help to wick moisture away from the animal and have little to no dust that could cause respiratory disease. The cage should be spot cleaned daily and bedding should be changed at least once weekly. Guinea pigs tend to defecate where they eat. Many find it helpful to place a litter box of hay (with low sides for ease of getting in and out) as their “kitchen area”. This area would need to be changed more frequently.

*\*\*Here at Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital and Exotic Care, we do not support housing guinea pigs outdoors for any reason. We believe guinea pigs should be housed indoors only for a variety of reasons including outdoor predators, insects which carry disease/parasites (fleas) and can cause disease (flystrike), and weather extremes can be detrimental to your pet.*

#### Toys/enrichment:

Guinea pigs get a fair amount of mental exercise from their diet of grass hay and green foods, but additional toys are appreciated. They like things that can be both moved and chewed. A cheap, easy, and safe way to achieve this is to use toilet paper/paper towel rolls, small empty cardboard cartons and small piles of shredded paper. For additional enrichment you can add in healthy treats, stuff hay in hiding areas, toilet paper rolls, and old tissue boxes. Giving a guinea pig a sense that they are foraging for their food is an excellent mental activity! If you are looking for additional toys, Oxbow is a brand that we recommend because it is made of safe materials for guinea pigs.

#### **Diet**

Fun fact: the only food items that guinea pigs actually need to thrive is unlimited hay and a good source of vitamin C! Since their teeth continuously grow, the hay helps keep them at a healthy length and keeps their fiber needing guts moving! Guinea pigs, like humans, cannot produce their own vitamin C. This will need to be offered to them daily in order to prevent a disease called Scurvy (vitamin C deficiency). This can be offered as a chew treat (Oxbow) or by providing vitamin C rich foods like bell peppers.

If your guinea pig is *less than 6 months old*, a mixture of alfalfa/timothy hay should be available as free choice. Alfalfa is too high in calcium for older guinea pigs and can lead to bladder stones and obesity. Guinea pigs under 6 months old can be offered unlimited alfalfa pellets for the calcium content. This helps their growing bodies!

A high-quality timothy guinea pig pellet (other rodent pellets cannot be substituted, guinea pigs cannot get rabbit pellets!) can be offered. Tip: Most guinea pigs do better when these are just used as treats!

If you do choose to feed pellets here are some recommendations:

- ❖ Pellets should ideally be 10% of a healthy guinea pig’s diet (no more than 1/8 cup per pig)
- ❖ 18% or higher in fiber
- ❖ 2.5% or lower in fat
- ❖ 16% or less in protein

- ❖ 1% or less in calcium
- ❖ DO NOT buy pellet mixes that also contain seeds, dried fruits, or nuts. Guinea pigs will usually selectively eat these items that are higher in fat which could lead to obesity. Think of trail mix, you like to eat all the M&Ms first before you eat the raisins!

Pellets can even be fed in a treat ball, which encourages added exercise as your guinea pushes the ball around the floor to get the pellets out.

A handful of vegetables can be offered daily (see shopping guide below) and should be about 20% of your guinea pig's diet.

Remember that guinea pigs are designed to live primarily on a diet of grasses and leaves; therefore, grass hay can provide a good portion of that diet!

While hay should be offered at all times, we recommended feeding veggies twice daily to ensure your guinea pig is eating well. Don't forget the vitamin C!

Water should be offered at all times. It can be offered in a dish or a sipper bottle. Sipper bottles need to be checked frequently to make sure they are not clogged with food debris. Make sure they are cleaned at least once weekly.

### Master Guinea Pig Grocery List

| Good to Feed!            | Feed Sparingly*                        | NEVER Feed**  |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| o Alfalfa Sprouts        | o Beet Greens                          | o Beans   |
| o Arugula                | o Bell Pepper                          | o Bread   |
| o Baby Greens            | o Bok Choy                             | o Cereal  |
| o Basil                  | o Borage                               | o Chocolate   |
| o Celery Leaves          | o Carrot Tops                          | o Corn  |
| o Cilantro               | o Chicory                              | o Grain   |
| o Dill                   | o Kale                                 | o Nuts  |
| o Endive                 | o Mustard Greens                       | o Peas  |
| o Escarole               | o Parsley                              | o Refined Sugars                                    |
| o Fennel                 | o Radish Tops                          | o Seeds   |
| o Frisee Lettuce         | o Spinach                              | o Wheat   |
| o Mine                   | o Sprouts (from 1-6 days of sprouting) | o Yogurt drops (and other commercial rabbit treats) |
| o Radicchio              | o Swiss Chard                          |   |
| o Raspberry Leaves       | o Turnip Greens                        |   |
| o Red/Green Leaf Lettuce | o Dock                                 |   |
| o Spring Greens          |  |   |
| o Watercress             |  |   |
| o Wheatgrass             |  |   |
| o Bok Choy               |  |   |

\*High calcium foods can lead to bladder stones.

\*\*High carbohydrate foods such as oatmeal, breads, crackers, and cereals can cause problems in the gut leading to GI stasis and diarrhea.

| <b>Rare Treat foods</b>   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Apple (no stem or seeds)</li> <li>o Apricot (no pit)</li> <li>o Banana (no more than ¼ in slice per day, no peel)</li> <li>o Berries</li> <li>o Carrots</li> <li>o Currants</li> <li>o Kiwi</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Pea Pods (no peas)</li> <li>o Pear</li> <li>o Pineapple</li> <li>o Plum</li> <li>o Mango</li> <li>o Nectarine (no pit)</li> <li>o Squash</li> </ul> |

## Vaccinations

Guinea pigs do not receive any vaccinations.

## Common Diseases of Guinea Pigs

Scurvy (Vitamin C Deficiency): Like humans, guinea pigs cannot produce their own vitamin C.. It is important that we provide vitamin C for them in their diet. Vitamin C is vital for normal development and maintenance of joints, skin, and healing. Signs of scurvy include rough hair coat, diarrhea, lack of appetite, reluctance to walk, pain, swollen joints/feet, or hemorrhages on the skin/gums. Adding in a fresh pepper daily is a great way to ensure your guinea pig is getting enough vitamin C. Oxbow also makes a vitamin C supplement tablet that can be used as a daily treat. Water additives are not as effective because you cannot ensure they are getting the proper amount in their daily diet.

Cystic ovaries: We recommend spaying guinea pigs after 6 months of age when they get close to their full size. If they remain intact there is a risk of developing cystic ovaries which can lead to abdominal pain, lethargy, inappetence, or hair loss.

Parasites: Guinea pigs can get fur mites and lice. Lice are species specific meaning that their lice cannot transfer to humans. If your guinea pig is itching, has crusty lesions, or is biting/overgrooming it's fur, a microscopic examination of the fur should be performed. After diagnosis a topical anti-parasitic medication will be prescribed.

Ringworm: Guinea pigs are prone to ringworm, a fungal infection of the skin (not a worm!). They can be ringworm carriers without showing any signs of illness. They can spread the disease to susceptible animals, people, or develop it themselves if they are stressed, have poor diet/nutrition, or have underlying diseases. The skin affected by ringworm is usually itchy, therefore signs include hair loss and development crusty scabs. After diagnosis, they are treated topically and/or orally with anti-fungal medications.

“Bumblefoot”: Also known as pododermatitis, this presents as swelling or irritation on the feet. Bumblefoot can be caused by pressure sores due to improper cage material, dirty bedding, or obesity. Treatment requires antibacterial medications to clean the infected feet and pain medication. Providing soft bedding is essential to allow the sores to heal.

Respiratory infections: Pneumonia can be caused by several bacteria, including Bordetella and Streptococcus. Guinea pigs can naturally harbor these bacteria and may not show any signs or symptoms. They can be carrier of the bacteria as well meaning they can pass it on to other susceptible animals. Bacteria like this tends to be opportunistic, meaning they infect susceptible animals, multiply, and cause disease if it has the opportunity. An x-ray can be taken to confirm the diagnosis and is usually treated with an antibiotic and pain medication. In some severe or chronic cases nebulization or

hospitalization for additional supportive care may be necessary. Signs of respiratory illness include a lack of appetite, eye/nose discharge, sneezing, or increased respiratory effort.

Diarrhea: This is a very dangerous condition in guinea pigs. There are many things that can cause diarrhea in guinea pigs such as parasites, improper diet, and medication sensitivity. If your guinea pig is experiencing diarrhea, it needs to be seen by your veterinarian **as soon as possible**.

GI stasis: Gastrointestinal stasis is when the guinea's gut slows down or stops completely. This is not a medical condition itself but is due to an underlying illness such as excessive gas in the GI tract, dental disease, or obstruction. . This is diagnosed by your veterinarian by taking x-rays and is treated with GI motility and pain medications.

Abscesses: Abscesses form due to underlying infections. Since guinea pigs (and other rodents/rabbits) form thicker pus than most species, it does not drain or get reabsorbed as easily. Most abscesses in guinea pigs need to be drained and followed by a course of antibiotics. Some abscesses can present in the jaw area or around the roots of teeth. These can be more challenging to treat as the affected bone and teeth may need to be removed along with the infected soft tissue surrounding it.

Urinary Stones: Guinea pigs are prone to development of urinary stones or uroliths. These stones most often form in the bladder but can sometimes be produced in the ureters (the tubes that drain the kidneys to the bladder) or the kidneys. Stones may become lodged in the urethra (the tube that carries the urine to the outside of the body). This can cause the urethra to become obstructed which can be life-threatening because they will be unable to produce urine. Signs of urinary problems include lack of eating, blood in urine, straining to urinate, a hunched posture, and small or frequent urinations.