

How to Care for Guinea Pigs

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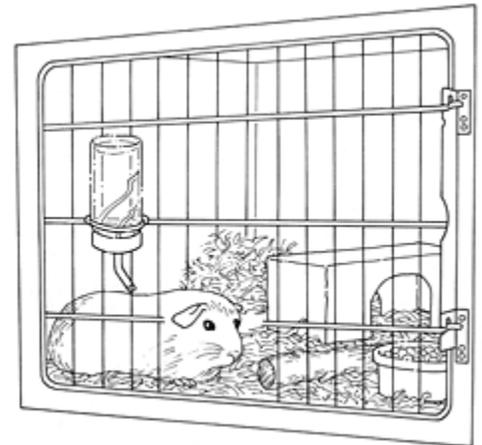
A descendant of the wild guinea pigs of South America, today's domesticated guinea pig is viewed by many as an "easy" pet for children. Soon enough, parents and children discover that this new companion animal requires substantially more care than the child's favorite stuffed toy. You know what often happens next: The guinea pig is brought to your shelter, in need of special attention because his owners failed to give him proper care. You will need to provide that for him until he can be placed with responsible adopters who can meet his needs.

Like rabbits, ferrets, and other small domesticated mammals, guinea pigs require an environment and treatment distinct from dogs and cats. By modifying what you already have in your shelter, adding a few extras, and following the steps below, you can help guinea pigs feel comfortable in your facility.

1: Make Room at the Inn

Ideally, guinea pigs should be kept with other small mammals in a room away from cats and dogs. If your shelter lacks a separate space, you can house guinea pigs in the cat room, but set up your caging so they do not have to face cats. Whatever room you use, maintain the temperature at 65-75 degrees to minimize the risk of respiratory disease.

They may be small, but guinea pigs require ample space to move about. Make sure their living quarters are at least 18 inches wide, 14 inches high, and 25 inches deep. Even though their stay with you will be temporary, guinea pigs housed in larger cages are more likely to be active, and thus more likely to attract prospective adopters. Traditional stainless-steel cat cages will work; aquariums, however, provide poor ventilation, and mesh or wire-floor cages hurt guinea pigs' tender feet.



When choosing floor linings and cage furnishings, keep in mind that guinea pigs will chew on just about anything to wear down their constantly growing teeth, so everything placed in the cage must be nontoxic. Use plenty of lining material—shredded ink-free paper or commercial nesting materials available at pet-supply stores, for example—because guinea pigs will use the material as both bedding and bathroom.

Remember also to provide plenty of high-quality hay, which these rodents use for nesting and snacking. Do not use materials such as sawdust, cedar chips, or fabrics that may cause respiratory or other health problems. Finally, provide your guests with a gnawing log (such as an untreated fruit tree branch), tunnels to crawl through, and platforms to climb on. Add a heavy food bowl resistant to tipping and gnawing and a water bottle with a sipper tube.

2: Get a Little Closer

Guinea pigs are easily stressed, so they require careful handling. To pick up the rodent, slowly place one hand under his chest just behind the front legs, and gently cup your other hand under his hindquarters. Once you have a firm but gentle grip on the animal, lift him. Then immediately pull him close to your chest or lap so he feels safe and doesn't thrash around.





3: Give 'Em Their Greens

Feed these animals commercial guinea pig food, formulated especially for the species. These herbivores require a lot of vitamin C, so feed them fresh veggies such as kale and cabbage and ask the assisting veterinarian about vitamin supplements. Treat guinea pigs to fruits, including melon slices and apples (but remove the seeds, which are toxic).

4: Help With the Cleanup

Guinea pigs try their best to keep clean, fastidiously grooming themselves with their front teeth, tongue, and back claws. But pigs—particularly the long-haired breeds—require frequent brushing and combing to stay clean and tangle-free.

Also, because their cage lining doubles as bedding and toilet, guinea pigs require daily housekeeping assistance. Scrub and disinfect the cage, then let it dry before lining the floor with fresh bedding and replacing the cage furnishings. Also clean the water bottle and sipper tube daily to prevent buildup of food, algae, and bacteria.



5: Pair Them Off

Guinea pigs are happiest when with other guinea pigs, so many pet care books urge owners to keep two or more together. Keep in mind, however, that what works best in a home isn't necessarily what works best in a shelter environment. Don't cage multiple guinea pigs together at your facility until you've resolved issues such as disease transmission and compatibility and verified that the pigs are the same sex.

Then, before promoting the benefits of pairs to potential adopters, you'll of course need to know which pairs are the same sex and temperamentally compatible. (For example, more than two male pigs together will likely fight.)

One final note about placing guinea pigs: Many parents select a guinea pig as a first pet for their child, believing a small pet needs only a small amount of care. Make sure adopters understand that these little guys have lots of requirements, including a roomy cage, specialized diet, daily cleanup, and gentle handling, and that an adult should be the primary caretaker. Have a veterinarian knowledgeable in small-animal care show your staff how to examine incoming animals and guide your staff in monitoring potential health problems. Also, have an expert help you determine the sex of each guinea pig—a tricky task—before caging two or more together or sending multiple animals home with a new adopter.