

Guinea pigs are friendly social creatures. They don't normally bite or scratch, and given enough space and attention they will give great entertainment with their antics. They have their specific requirements, so before you decide to acquire a guinea pig as a pet, make sure you are ready for the commitment.

The **basic needs** of a guinea pig can be summarised as follows:

- **Appropriate food and clean water**
- **Comfortable shelter**
- **Hiding boxes**
- **Companionship**
- **A secure environment**
- **Space and regular exercise**
- **Veterinary care**

Choosing your guinea pig

Before you bring home your guinea pig you will need to have its accommodation ready. If you decide to acquire a guinea pig, ask first from your local animal shelter. Look for a guinea pig that looks alert and healthy. Ideally you should get **two guinea pigs**, as they are **highly social animals** that need company, and owners cannot normally spend enough time with them. Two females will live peacefully together, while it's not advisable to house two males together, as aggression may be displayed. A mixed sex

couple is also an option as long as the male is neutered to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

The average life span of a guinea pig is between 5 and 7 years.



Housing

Guinea pigs like company and are unhappy on their own, so when choosing you should choose two or three to live together. If you don't wish to breed it is best to choose females as there is no rivalry, if you want to get males it is best to get them from the same litter.

The cage or hutch should be large as cramped conditions make for unhappy pets, with a **box** in one end of the cage/hutch lined with hay for them to sleep in. You can enrich the accommodation with a variety of inexpensive toys, such as tubes and logs. The floor of the hutch should be covered in layers of newspaper covered with hay or wood chips - but make sure the wood chips are not treated with hazardous chemicals.

General care

Remove soiled bedding, left-over food or any pieces of fruit or vegetables every day; replace bedding and clean thoroughly once a week. As guinea pigs **teeth** are **continually growing**, they need something to gnaw on at all times, hay – apart from its nutritional benefits – is very useful for this purpose and should be available at all times. A piece of untreated wood or a suitable toy will also help.

Diet

Guinea pigs cannot synthesize their own vitamin C, so need food that is rich in **vitamin C**. Dark greens such as broccoli and kale are a good source of vitamin C, which can also be added to their water. They will need fresh foods such as carrots, cucumbers, and apples. Hay should be offered *ad libitum* as the fibres help to keep the gut and teeth healthy. They can drink up to 4fl oz of water a day, so water bottles should be kept filled, clean, and water changed every day. Sunflower seeds and oil are harmful to guinea pigs and should be avoided.

Exercise

Guinea pigs need 15 minutes (minimum) exercise every day, but keep in mind that exercise wheels are not suitable as they can damage a guinea pig's back. Make **tunnels** out of plastic pipes or cardboard tubes as guinea pigs are **prey animals**, and as such need to have access to places to **hide** in to

feel safe. Bricks or rocks to climb over keep nails worn down and help with muscle tone. Prepare a safe place for them to exercise - a child's play pen would be ideal, as this could be used both indoor and outdoor. If your guinea pig is kept outdoors in the summer, protect it from the sun to prevent potentially lethal sunstroke. If your guinea pig happens to get wet, towel dry gently and keep indoors until it dries completely to avoid chilling.

Breeding

Guinea pigs should NOT be bred as this adds to the number of unwanted pets in animal shelters today. Females over the age of 10 months should not be bred from: the pelvic bones will have fused by this age, and if pregnancy occurs the female may die in the process of giving birth.

Guinea pigs and children

All animals need plenty of care and attention, which cannot be reliably provided by a child. If you would like your child to enjoy the company of a guinea pig, you must consider whether you can commit **your time** to caring for the pet appropriately, as this will be your responsibility as an adult. Enjoy your guinea pigs, and remember pets give unconditional love: treat them with respect and you will always have a friend.

Guinea pigs and other pets

Guinea pigs are surprisingly fragile, they are also non aggressive. If kept with a rabbit,

the Guinea pig can commonly become the victim of bullying, particularly if the rabbit is male. Rabbits may also carry viruses which cause fatal respiratory illness in Guinea pigs.

Cats are often predatory towards Guinea pigs - some cats, however, may be friendly – in any case any contact should be closely supervised.

Mature dogs which have become accustomed to the Guinea pig as one of the family may be introduced, but again, any contact should be supervised, as conflict can easily arise over food bowls and territory.

Guinea pigs are not aggressive towards small birds, but may be afraid of the bird. Budgerigars, Canaries, finches, quail and doves may all live together with Guinea pigs, however larger members of the parrot family may be aggressive.



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**Caring for your
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