

Get to know

Guinea Pigs

From squeaks of excitement when it's dinner time, to cuddling up in your lap – guinea pigs come with a range of personalities and groovy hairstyles to match. Here's what you need to know about owning these adorable pocket pets.

A native of South America, the guinea pig has long been a favourite of children and first time pet owners. In Australia, available breeds fall into three main varieties: smooth, long, or rough coated.

Just like us, guinea pigs have their own unique personalities and are highly social creatures, preferring to spend their time in pairs or groups. The average lifespan is five to eight years.

As natural prey creatures, they are very susceptible to stress and shock, so it's important to keep them in an environment that is safe and comfortable.

Housing

Guinea pigs are naturally active animals, and need a home which is clean, dry, and gives them room to run around to stay happy and

healthy.

The

recommended hutch size is:

➤ 1m x 70cm for one guinea pig.

However, guinea pigs should be kept in groups;

➤ 1.4m x 70cm for two guinea pigs

➤ 1.6m x 80cm for three guinea pigs. Like us, guinea pigs need daily exercise, so make sure you have space for them to run around and explore; a few guinea pig safe obstacles can keep things interesting and encourage activity.

Whilst the kind of bedding that's best will depend on the variety of guinea pig and their environment, as a general rule – a hutch lined with newspaper followed by grass hay will work for most types. If you're planning to keep your guinea pig outdoors, ensure there is

adequate fencing and protection from predators and harsh weather. They will also need water and food bowls, as well as hide-holes.

Cleaning

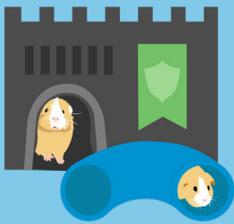
Guinea Pigs are messy, so it is important to regularly change bedding and floor material. Enclosures need to be cleaned out to avoid ammonia build-up from urine and also to help minimise the attraction of flies to the area. The bedding should be cleaned and changed as required (this is typically once a day). The enclosure should be thoroughly washed and disinfected once a week.

How to Bond with your Guinea Pigs

Hand feeding them will help associate you with positive interactions



Allowing them to retreat to their hidey holes when they feel scared



Talking to your guinea pig in a quiet, calm voice



Sitting on the floor with them gently placed on your lap



Exercise and enrichment

They are great explorers, have brilliant spatial awareness and a strong sense of smell and hearing.

Guinea pigs need exercise, mental stimulation, environmental enrichment (e.g. toys, tunnels etc), and the ability to express their normal behaviours (e.g. social interaction with other guinea pigs, walking, running, tunnelling, exploring, playing, stretching horizontally, retreating to a shelter and hiding, foraging, chewing, gnawing, and jumping).

Handling

Daily handling and grooming is important in building your guinea pigs' confidence and for developing friendly and social guinea pigs.

It is best to handle guinea pigs when they are young to help them feel comfortable. Make sure that you handle them carefully, securely, and gently. If they want to, you should allow guinea pigs to retreat and hide. Try never to remove them from a hiding area and force interaction or handling with them; they need to feel that their hiding areas are safe and secure.

Heat Management

In the hot summer months it's important that guinea pigs stay cool as their cage will limit their ability to get out of the sun and they are prone to quickly overheating. If your guinea pigs live outdoors, move hutches out of the path of direct sun.

Whilst an adequate water supply is



essential year-round, it's especially important as the weather heats up. Placing a brick or tile in the hutch will provide a cool spot for your guinea pig to lie down and cool its tummy. Wetting or placing an ice pack on the surface will provide extra cooling on particularly hot days.

Health

Ulcerative pododermatitis, otherwise known as swollen footpads, occurs when there is a lack of cushioning on the hutch floor. This can be prevented by ensuring that the hay layer is adequately thick or have a solid floor base.

Another common environmental condition is mites, with symptoms including hair loss and scratching. If your vet does inform you that your guinea pig has mites, treat it with a thorough cleaning of the cage. Not all vets will have the specialist knowledge to cover the complete care of guinea pigs, so seek out a small pet specialist. If you're unsure how to find one, ask your local vet for a recommendation.

Grooming

The amount of grooming required will depend on whether your guinea pig is a short or long haired variety. Longer haired guinea pigs will require daily brushing. For short hair, a brush every couple of weeks is sufficient.

A guinea pig's nails need regular clipping, about once a month. As their nails grow, so too does the blood supply to the nail — so make



sure to only trim the ends. Guinea pigs aren't always the biggest fans of having their nails clipped so this might be a two-person job, and watch out for wayward teeth or claws! If nail clipping proves too tricky for you or your furry friend, you can have them clipped by your vet, although this is of course a pricier option.

For bedding, enclosures, food and grooming options for your guinea pig, check out worldforpets.com.au

Feeding

Guinea pigs are natural herbivores. A healthy guinea pig diet consists predominantly of hay, grain mix, and green leafy vegetables, supplemented with fruits and vegetables; particularly those high in vitamin C like red capsicum and parsley. For a treat, guinea pigs love corn husks and fresh herbs!

Vitamin C is an important part of a guinea pig's daily diet, as like us, their bodies cannot produce it on their own. The recommended daily minimum is 20mg. Food sources like grass, vegetables and fruit are preferable, vitamin C supplements aren't recommended unless directed by a specialist veterinarian.

A guinea pig's back teeth never stop growing; chewing hay helps to

wear them down and prevents dental problems. Suitable hays like wheat, oat, or barley can be found at produce and pet stores, or vet clinics specialising in guinea pig care. For grain mixes, look for one high in fibre and crude protein and remember fresh is best — they lose nutrients the longer they stay on the shelf. If you can't find a specialised mix, produce stores will often sell horse grain mixes which will satisfy guinea pig nutritional needs.

Foods to avoid feeding your guinea pig include potatoes, iceberg lettuce, onions or anything that has spoiled. If you wouldn't eat it, neither should your guinea pig!

Ready to commit?

Guinea pigs are very social animals, so you should keep at least two together. Two or more females get along well; so do one desexed male and a group of females. Guinea pigs live for about five to eight years, and need as much attention as other furry companions. Are you prepared to care for them for this time?

For more information visit rspcaql.org.au ■



GUINEA PIG

Shopping list

- A spacious predator proof cage
- Food bowls
- Water bottles
- Hay and hay rack
- Bedding
- Guinea Pig grain mix
- Vegetables and fruit
- Brush and nail clippers



A GUINEA PIG'S DAILY

Dietary Guide

UNLIMITED
WATER



UNLIMITED
HAY



**Do not use:
Lucerne it's too sugary
or Straw it's not hay*

FRESH VEGIES
1 cup



PELLETS
1/8 cup



**Use a good quality Guinea Pig pellet*

FRUIT
as a treat

