

## Caring for your Guinea Pig

### BASIC HUSBANDRY

#### General Information

##### Vital Statistics

Body Weight: Male 900g–1,200g; Female 700–900g

Life Span: Average 4–5 years; Maximum 8 years

Sexual Maturity: Male 3–4 months of age; Female 2–3 months of age

##### Behavior and Handling

- Guinea pigs should be held gently with two hands. Their hind end should always be supported.
- When handling guinea pigs, try to avoid excessive noise, needless excitement, and over-handling.
- Children handling the guinea pig should sit on the floor and hold the guinea pig in their lap. Children should only handle guinea pigs under adult supervision.
- Guinea pigs do not adapt well to changes in their food or environment. Hair barbering (chewing of the fur) may occur in situations of stress and overcrowding. If this occurs please contact your veterinarian.

##### Reproductive Information

- It is extremely important not to let your female guinea pig breed as she reaches six months of age. At around this age, the bones of the pelvis fuse if the animal has not been bred. If a guinea pig in this condition becomes pregnant, she will most likely require high risk surgery to remove the babies.
- Guinea pigs are social animals and will establish a pecking order that is frequently male-dominated. Overcrowding may incite aggression among guinea pigs, and noncastrated males may be aggressive towards other males in the presence of females.
- Guinea pigs should be kept as single pets, or should be kept in separate cages.

##### Housing

- Guinea pigs should be housed separately in a cage that is a minimum of 2 ft. x 3 ft.
- The cage bottom should be solid Plexiglas, hard plastic, or stainless steel. Wire mesh bottoms should never be used for a guinea pig cage, because the guinea pig can get its feet caught, which can lead to serious injuries.
- Cage bedding should consist of a paper pulp product (such as Care Fresh or Yesterday's News), newspaper, or computer paper. Wood base products such as pine, wood, or cedar shavings are not recommended, because they can lead to the development of allergies and upper respiratory infections.
- Guinea pig cages should be cleaned completely with warm soap and water every few days. In place of soap and water, a dilute (1:30) bleach/water solution can be used.



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- A litter box should be offered at all times.
- Remember to use only paper pulp products as litter.
- Clay cat litter, clumping cat litter, and wood shavings are not recommended because they can cause eye, skin, and respiratory problems.

## **Diet**

- Guinea pigs should be offered Timothy hay on a “free choice” basis (as much as they can eat). Guinea pigs should be fed 1/8 –1/4 cup of Timothy based pellets or Cavy Cuisine daily.
- Guinea pigs should be given low calcium greens, such as red and green leaf lettuce, escarole, watercress, clover, swiss chard, bok choy, endive, turnip tops, and romaine lettuce.
- Dark leafy greens such as kale, dandelion, collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, kale, and broccoli should be avoided due to their high calcium content.
- You can offer your guinea pig small pieces of apple, oranges, or carrot, but only as treats.
- Fresh water should be offered daily in either a sipper or a spill proof bowl.
- Vitamin C is an essential part of the guinea pig’s diet and should be offered on a daily basis. Give 0.35 ml, of a 500 mg/tsp concentration, by mouth once daily. Vitamin C should NOT be added to the water, because this promotes bacterial growth and is not a consistent way to ensure your guinea pig is receiving the proper dosage. Keep vitamin C out of direct sunlight, because it will break down when exposed to light.
- Food and water dishes should be cleaned every few days. Dishes can be cleaned in the dishwasher, or they can be soaked in a dilute (1:30) bleach to water solution.

## MEDICAL CONDITIONS

### Conditions Requiring Veterinary Attention

#### **Malocclusion of Premolars and Molars**

- Malocclusion of premolars and molars can be a recurring problem in Guinea Pigs. Symptoms include becoming picky about what they eat, anorexia, and weight loss. Guinea pigs may also drool or slobber. Treatment includes sedating the guinea pig and trimming the molars.

#### **Vitamin C Deficiency**

- Unlike other animals, guinea pigs are unable to create vitamin C on their own; therefore, a dietary source of vitamin C must be provided daily for good health. Symptoms of deficiency include inappetance, swollen or painful joints and ribs, reluctance to move, poor bone and tooth development, spontaneous bleeding from the gums, crustiness around the eyes and respiratory disease.

## **Upper Respiratory Infection/Pneumonia**

- Upper respiratory infections can quickly become serious and should be treated immediately. Symptoms include labored and/or rapid breathing, discharge from the eyes and nostrils, lethargy, inappetance, sneezing, and coughing. Upper respiratory infections are commonly seen in newly acquired guinea pigs. Pneumonia develops very quickly and can rapidly lead to death.

## **Lice/Mites/Mange**

- Lice and mites are common skin parasites in newly acquired animals. Symptoms include itchy and/or red skin, hair loss, and irritability. Treatment for lice and mites may include injections and/or topical medications that kill parasites.

## **Bladder Stones/Sludgy Bladder**

- Older guinea pigs may develop bladder stones or sludge in the bladder. A stone is a discrete mineralized deposit; whereas, sludge is a clay-like sediment that can build up in the urinary bladder. High calcium diets can predispose guinea pigs to these conditions. Symptoms include straining to urinate, frequent urination, grunting, abdominal discomfort, and blood in urine. Radiographs are necessary to diagnose these conditions.

## **EMERGENCY / CRITICAL CARE**

All emergencies require veterinary assistance. Use the following guidelines to assist you in caring for your guinea pig until you can contact a veterinarian.

### **Traumatic Injuries**

#### **Broken Bones**

- Provide your guinea pig with soft bedding such as a towel, blanket, or sheep skin.
- Minimize handling.
- Keep your guinea pig in a **warm**, dark, and quiet area.
- Keep your guinea pig as calm as possible and contact a veterinarian or local animal emergency clinic immediately.

#### **Skin Injuries/Blood loss**

- For any type of injury with blood loss, use direct pressure with a towel or clean gauze to prevent further blood loss. Contact your veterinarian immediately if you are unable to stop the bleeding.

#### **Head Injuries**

- Provide your guinea pig with soft bedding such as a towel, blanket, or sheep skin.
- Minimize handling.
- Keep your guinea pig in a **cool**, dark, and quiet environment.
- Keep your guinea pig as calm as possible and contact a veterinarian or local animal emergency clinic immediately.

## **Animal Bites**

- Animal bites can be a very serious problem and should never be ignored. The wounds can become infected quickly and potentially lead to systemic infection. Any type of animal bite requires immediate attention from your veterinarian.
- For any type of wound that is bleeding you should follow the skin injuries/blood loss recommendations as listed above.

## Severe Illnesses

### **Respiratory Distress**

- If your guinea pig experiences open-mouth breathing or gasping for air, remove all bedding and minimize handling and stress.
- Keep your guinea pig in a quiet, **cool**, and dark environment until you are able to reach your veterinarian or local animal emergency clinic.

## HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

### Things For Your Veterinarian To Do

#### **Yearly Physical Exam**

- All newly acquired guinea pigs should get an initial exam. During the exam the veterinarian will check the incisor and molar teeth, eyes, ears, heart, lungs, and abdomen. The veterinarian will also check the hair and skin for external parasites such as lice or mites. A fecal exam will be performed to check for intestinal parasites.
- Your guinea pig should receive a health exam once a year.

#### **Blood Work**

- In addition to an annual exam, your guinea pig may need annual blood work once they reach middle age (3–4 years old). *Sedation is required for this procedure.*

### Things For You To Do

#### **Nail Trims**

- Your guinea pig should have its nails trimmed regularly to prevent the nails from overgrowing and cutting into the foot pads or catching on the cage, toys, etc.

#### **Vitamin C**

- Vitamin C should be given every day, because guinea pigs are not able to synthesize the vitamin on their own.

#### **Over-the-Counter Medications**

- Over-the-counter topical triple antibiotic ointments or any other type of over-the-counter medications are not recommended without first consulting your veterinarian. Products such as triple antibiotic ointment (for the use of minor skin injuries) can cause digestive problems if ingested and can potentially become toxic over time.