
PENNYROYAL

Small and Exotic Animal Hospital
247 Regency Circle
Lexington, KY 40503
(859)277-4315

Bianca Zaffarano, D.V.M.

Care of Your Guinea Pig

General Information:

The *Cavia porcellus*, better known as the guinea pig or cavy, is a member of the rodent family. Originally domesticated in South America, they were used for food and in religious ceremonies. Some tribes in South America still raise them for food. The common types of guinea pigs seen in the US are Abyssinian, with short coarse hair that grows in rosettes and whorls, American and English shorthair varieties, and Peruvians, with hair up to 10-15 inches in length. Guinea pigs have short, barrel-shaped bodies and no tail. Known for being quite vocal, guinea pigs have a wide variety of whistles, purrs, squeals, and chuckles.

Housing:

Guinea pigs need a cage with approximately 2 square feet of floor space per guinea pig with cage walls at least 10 inches in height. Guinea pigs are not proficient jumpers, so a cage that is enclosed on top is not necessary as long as there are no small children or other animals that would have access to the cage. There are many cages available in stores marketed for guinea pigs. Many of these cages have wire mesh bottoms and it is best to avoid them. If a wire mesh bottomed cage is used, a 12x38mm mesh should be used to reduce the injury potential. Alternatively, plastic cage bottom coverings are available to fit wire mesh cages so that they can be used for guinea

pigs. There are numerous plastic bottomed cages on the market that are excellent for guinea pigs and are easily cleaned. The use of fish tanks to house guinea pigs is a common practice. It is important to keep in mind with this type of housing that the solid walls cut down on air circulation and ammonia levels will concentrate, requiring more frequent cleanings.

Hardware:

Guinea pigs like to perch on the side of their dishes while they eat; therefore, food should be kept in large heavy crocks that are pet safe. Food dishes and water bottles should be cleaned daily and completely washed in hot soapy water at least once weekly.

Bedding:

Various bedding materials are marketed for use with small mammals including aspen, cedar, and pine wood shavings, recycled paper, corncob, and pressed grasses. Cedar and pine wood shavings have volatile hydrocarbons and aromatic oils that have been associated with induced liver enzymes and respiratory irritation. Wet corncob bedding easily grows fungus and usage is also discouraged.

Grooming:

Most guinea pigs require minimal grooming. Peruvian breeds, however, require daily grooming to prevent hair from matting. Nails should be trimmed at least once monthly. Cat nail clippers or toenail clippers work well. Owners can often be trained to trim their own pet's nails. Wrapping the guinea pig in a towel and only exposing the leg being clipped is a common method of clipping nails. Alternatively, food distractions can be used.

Exercise:

Guinea pigs are most active in the morning

and early evening, which makes them great pets for people who work during the day. Most of the day they will rest and sleep. They can be seen lying on their sides with feet extended or lying on their chests with feet tucked under them. It is best to let them sleep during this sedentary time period. Once awakened, however, they will usually enthusiastically and readily respond to a vocal greeting or human interaction. Caged guinea pigs should have periods of exercise at least several times weekly. Make sure the exercise area is free of electric cords and other dangerous items that can be chewed or eaten. Guinea pigs may also run or play in a plastic baby swimming pool along with hay and greens and a cardboard box.

Dietary Needs:

Guinea pigs, like humans and non-human primates, lack the gene necessary for the production of an enzyme necessary to convert glucose to vitamin C. To meet daily requirements, they need 5-30mg/kg per day of

vitamin C in supplements or food. Since this vitamin is not stable in water, it is not suggested that any supplement be added to water supplies. Adding supplements to the water supply also tends to discourage guinea pigs from drinking as much water as it should, and it encourages a bacterial slime buildup on the inside of the water bowl requiring daily cleaning with hot soapy water. Commercially produced diets for guinea pigs are supplemented with vitamin C. Heat, dampness, and light break down the vitamin in pelleted food, however, and after 6 weeks approximately 50% of the available vitamin C is gone. Buying fresh pellets and storing them in a cool, dark place can minimize this degradation. Pellets should not be the sole source of vitamin C, however, and supplementation in the diet is recommended. Guinea pigs deficient in vitamin C can exhibit crusty eyes, rough hair coat, poor growth, lethargy and anorexia, pain in the limbs, and in severe cases malformation of the limbs. Supplementing

the diet with vegetables is the best way to ensure that the guinea pig receives an adequate amount of vitamin C. An adult guinea pig should receive approximately 1 cup of fresh vegetables a day. Seventy-five percent of these vegetables should be dark, leafy vegetables, such as parsley, kale, cilantro, broccoli, or bell pepper, which are high in vitamin C. The remaining portion can come from other fresh vegetables and fruit that are good sources of vitamin C. Many authors recommend only offering fruit as an occasional treat due to their high acidity.

Foods that are high in carbohydrates or sugars

should not be fed as they provide nutrients with the “bad-guy” bacteria will flourish in the intestinal tract. These include bread, cereals, oats, crackers, cookies, corn or popcorn, chips and other obviously sugary table foods or treats. Also avoid small mammal, rodent and guinea pig “treat” mixes that may include seeds, dried vegetables, Canadian trapper peas or other additives. Guinea pigs, like children (and many adults!), will choose the favored treat items over the nutritionally complete pellets. Feeding these mixes may lead to nutritional deficiencies, obesity, and worse, serious stomach and intestinal problems. Pellets should be only a

small part of your guinea pig’s diet, with the high fiber hay and fresh greens making up most of what is offered daily.

Hay:

Hay is an important component of the diet. There are hays commercially produced for rabbits and rodents, primarily timothy and alfalfa hay. Alfalfa hay is good choice for young, growing guinea pigs because of its high protein and calcium content. Older, more sedentary guinea pigs tend to get fat on high quality hay and are best fed other hays such as timothy or orchard grass. Hay should be offered free choice at all times.

References:

- “Frequently Asked Questions About Guinea Pigs,” Teresa Bradley, D.V.M. Belton Animal Clinic. Belton, MO.
- “General Information About Guinea Pigs,” Texas A&M University, 2001.