



A Guide to guinea pigs

An easy-to-use reference guide
to caring for guinea pigs

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About GPAW

Guinea Pig Awareness Week (GPAW) is an annual campaign, brought to you by Burgess Pet Care, aimed at educating pet owners about the five welfare needs of guinea pigs. Supported by our wonderful partners RSPCA, PDSA, Blue Cross and Wood Green, we will be bringing you a week full of fun and educational content all about guinea pigs across all of our social media channels and our GPAW website.

You can get involved by following our Facebook page, you can scan the code below or search @guineapigawarenessweek and liking and sharing our posts. You could go one step further and host your own event on your social media pages, visit www.guineapigawarenessweek.com to download your virtual pack which includes ready-made posts, a handy 'how-to' guide and lots more.



GPAW's Perfect Piggies Guide to Happy & Healthy Guinea Pigs

Welcome to GPAW's guide to caring for your guinea pigs. Please read through this guide and keep it handy for reference.

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Introduction to guinea pigs

Guinea pigs originate from South America and are thought to have been domesticated and brought to Europe as early as the 16th century.

Their scientific name is 'Cavia porcellus', which is why they are sometimes referred to as 'cavies'. The word 'porcellus' is Latin for 'little pig'. This name may have come about because of the pig-like squeaking noises they make.

Owning guinea pigs can be really fun and rewarding, but it must not be underestimated how much time and care they need to stay happy and healthy. Read our handy guide on the welfare needs of these cheeky little rodents to make sure you are fully prepared to welcome them into your family.

The five welfare needs:

Traditionally guinea pigs have been thought of as children's pets but while it's lovely for children to enjoy the company of guinea pigs, the responsibility for any animal's wellbeing lies with adults. Small animals are often more complex to feed and care for than a cat or dog and require more care and attention than a child can offer.



Environment

A suitable place to live



Health

To be healthy and protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease



Diet

A suitable diet that provides all the essential nutrients



Companionship

To be housed in suitable pairs or groups



Behaviour

To be able to exhibit normal behaviour



Getting guinea pigs

Where to get your guinea pigs

There are lots of options available when it comes to buying guinea pigs, including rescue centres, breeders and pet shops. Wherever you get your guinea pigs from it is important that you do some research to ensure that they have a good reputation and can give you information on their sex, care, and medical history. They should also be willing to answer your questions and will also want to be sure that the guinea pigs are going to a suitable home.

Things to consider

Guinea pigs should always be kept in suitable pairs or groups as they are very social animals and can become depressed when alone so when choosing them as a pet make sure you are prepared to have more than one.

You will also need to consider things such as who will look after them when you go on holiday or are away from home for a long period of time. This could be a friend or family member if you know someone who is willing to help or you may need to think about professional boarding, which will have a cost associated with it.

Preparing to bring guinea pigs home

Before you bring your guinea pigs home you will need to make sure you have everything that you need to look after them. If in doubt speak to a veterinary professional or the place where you are intending to get your guinea pigs from.

You should also think about getting pet insurance for your piggies to help with any unexpected vet bills and researching a guinea pig friendly vet in the area in case you should need them.

Fun Fact

The oldest recorded guinea pig, called Snowball, lived to the ripe old age of 14 years, 10 months, earning a place in the Guinness Book of Records!

Shopping List

Excel Feeding Hay

Excel Nuggets

Bedding

Litter tray

Housing

Suitable toys

Water bottle and/or bowl

Food bowl

Pet insurance

Grooming kit
(especially for long haired breeds)

Pet carrier

Diet and nutrition

As exotic pets, guinea pigs require a specialist diet to meet all their nutritional requirements. Wild guinea pigs naturally eat a diet of grasses, plants, vegetables and crops.

Guinea pigs are herbivores which means that they are entirely vegetarian and need high levels of fibre to keep their digestive system working correctly, their gut should be in constant motion with two types of fibre (digestible and indigestible). They get this fibre mainly from high quality feeding hay which should make up the bulk of their diet.

This is how the process works:

- **Indigestible fibre** is moved through their digestive system and excreted as separate, hard droppings. This type of fibre keeps the digestive system moving and their appetite stimulated.
- **Digestible fibre** is moved up into an organ called the caecum - which is like a giant appendix. Good bacteria in the caecum ferment the fibre, making it easy to digest. This is then excreted as sticky droppings, called caecotrophs. Guinea pigs then re-eat the caecotrophs so they can absorb the rest of the essential nutrients when they pass through a second time.

If guinea pigs don't get the right amounts of both digestible and indigestible fibre, it can rapidly lead to serious health problems. Following the **Excel 5-step Feeding Plan**, which was developed in conjunction with small-animal vets, will provide your guinea pigs with the perfect daily balance of fibre and nutrition.

Their teeth are designed to continually grow so need to be worn down naturally by fibrous, abrasive foods to avoid dental problems such as overgrown teeth which can be very painful for them. Hay is good for dental health as the gnawing action required to eat it helps to wear down their teeth.

Vitamins

Your guinea pigs' diet also needs to be

supplemented with plenty of vitamin C, as they lack the enzyme needed to produce it and can only store vitamin C for short periods. Vitamin C is important for healthy skin, joints and blood vessels. Vitamin C can be found in good quality, high fibre nuggets and certain fresh greens.



Foods to avoid

Never feed your guinea pigs with human food - chocolate and dairy products are particularly dangerous and citrus fruit can upset their sensitive tummies. Also avoid potato, nuts, onion and related vegetables, rhubarb, tomato leaves, buttercups, daffodils, poppies and tulips.



Guinea pigs may selectively feed if fed a muesli style diet which means that they pick out the pieces of the food which are high in starch and sugar and leave the high fibre pieces which they need. To prevent selective feeding, it is recommended that a small amount of high fibre, good quality nuggets are fed daily alongside hay instead of muesli.

It is extremely important that you feed your guinea pigs according to the feeding guidelines on pack as over feeding nuggets can reduce hay intake and lead to obesity.

Transition from Muesli to Nuggets

If your guinea pigs are currently on a muesli style diet you can transition them over to a nugget diet but make sure you do this slowly so as not to upset their sensitive digestive systems.



Don't forget the hay!

The Excel Feeding Plan

Our 5-step feeding plan has been developed with vets

EXCEL FEEDING HAY & GRASS

1

Excel Feeding Hay & Grass

High quality, dust-extracted hay or fresh grass should make up 85-90% of your guinea pigs' diet. You should make sure this is freely available and replace it with fresh hay every day. Check out our top tips for encouraging your piggies to eat more hay!

EXCEL TASTY NUGGETS

2

Excel Tasty Nuggets

A small amount of tasty, high-fibre nuggets should be fed as a supplement to feeding hay or grass to ensure that your guinea pigs get all of the vitamins and minerals they need. High in 'beneficial fibre' to promote digestive health, they also contain prebiotics to help with healthy eyes, skin and coat. Importantly, they also prevent selective feeding - unlike muesli-type foods where small animals just pick out the high starch/sugar components, leading to all kinds of health issues.

EXCEL NATURE SNACKS

3

Excel Nature Snacks

Healthy, grass-based snacks can be fed in small amounts to treat your guinea pigs. Our high fibre baked treats can be hand fed to help with bonding. Forage mixes are good for sprinkling on hay to help to encourage natural foraging behaviour and our Meadow Munchies can be left around their housing to keep them occupied.

FRESH GREENS

4

Fresh Greens

These can be added to your guinea pigs' diet for some variety and to provide additional nutrients. Examples of greens which are suitable for feeding daily include: dandelion leaves, plantain, strawberry and raspberry leaves, cauliflower leaves, hawthorn, celery leaves, green pepper, kale, romaine lettuce and spring greens.

FRESH WATER

5

Fresh Water

Fresh water should always be available. Change it daily and check it regularly during the winter months to ensure it hasn't frozen.



The Excel Range

Hay All our hay products are 100% natural and dust extracted.

Excel Feeding Hay with Dandelion & Marigold

Luscious timothy hay sprinkled with tasty dandelion and marigold petals to encourage natural foraging behaviour and help to prevent boredom. Available in a 1kg bag.



Excel Feeding Hay with Hedgerow Herbs

The newest addition to our range is our delicious blend of meadow grasses and herbs inspired by the Great British hedgerow. Tempting dandelion, camomile, nettle and mallow will help encourage your furry friends to forage. It is also our largest bag of hay yet at 3kg!



Nuggets

Excel Guinea Pig Nuggets

Our nuggets are high in beneficial fibre and protected vitamin C and come in two delicious flavours Mint and Blackcurrant & Oregano. Nuggets are an important supplement to hay to ensure your Guinea pigs are getting the vitamins and minerals that they need, they also prevent selective feeding. Available in a variety of pack sizes from 2kg-10kg.



How to perform a daily piggy healthcheck

1. Check your piggies' eyes and nose for any discharge or mucus.
2. Check your piggies' coat is glossy and well kept and their skin is healthy.
3. Check your piggies are moving around normally.
4. Note any changes in your piggies' behaviour.
5. Check your piggies are eating all parts of their diet.
6. Check your piggies are passing urine and droppings normally.
7. Check the skin around your piggies' bottom for any signs of wet which can cause fly strike (check twice daily in summer months!)



If your guinea pig shows any signs of illness or disease take them to your vet.

GPAW's Perfect Piggies Programme



Welcome to the Perfect Piggies Programme!

Guinea Pig Awareness Week brings a nation of Guinea Pig lovers together to help spread the word about how to properly care for them.

Our handy checklist helps you to remember to complete all of the daily and weekly tasks necessary to keep your piggies happy and healthy.

Perfect Piggy Activity	Week 1							Week 2							Week 3							Week 4							Perfect Piggies Score
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	
My piggies ate their body size in hay																													/28
My piggies ate their recommended amount of high fibre nuggets																													/28
I gave my piggies a handful of fresh greens																													/28
I hid my piggies' nuggets in their hay to encourage foraging																													/28
I refilled my piggies' water bowl/bottle																													/28
I interacted with my piggies																													/28
My piggies had space to exercise																													/28
I cleaned my piggies out																													/28
I checked my piggies' body score*																													/28
I checked my piggies for signs of illness																													/28
I checked my piggies' bottoms for sticky droppings																													/28
weekly I gave my piggies a health check																													/4

*To check your piggies' body score visit <https://www.pfma.org.uk/pet-size-o-meter>
One point per activity per day.



How to perform a weekly piggy healthcheck

1. Check your piggies' coat for any signs of dandruff, fleas or foreign bodies.
2. Check inside your piggies' ears for discharge.
3. Check the length and alignment of your piggies' front teeth.
4. Check your piggies' weight and keep note of any changes in it.
5. Give your piggies a gentle groom, this can also help you to bond with your piggies.

(Long haired piggies will need grooming more than once weekly.)



If your guinea pig shows any signs of illness or disease take them to your vet.

The Excel Range

Nature Snacks

Our brand-new range of Nature Snacks has been developed with animal nutritionists to make sure that not only are they delicious for your piggies but healthy too!

Baked treats

Baked with love, these irresistible heart-shaped treats are made from natural ingredients and are high in fibre. They are perfect for hand feeding which will help you bond with your guinea pigs and they're in a handy resealable pack to keep them fresh.

Available in two tempting flavours:
Fruity Feasts with fresh Banana and blueberry
Herby Hearts with Apple and mixed herbs



Meadow Munchies

Our Meadow Munchies are compressed rolls of tasty meadow hay with added dandelion and camomile for extra taste. Your guinea pigs will have endless fun gnawing and foraging which is good for dental and emotional health.



Environment

Your guinea pigs' housing should be draught-free, predator proof and, along with plenty of bedding hay or animal safe paper bedding, provide a cosy place to sleep. It should be as big as possible but an absolute minimum of 4ft by 2ft to allow them to roam as they would in the wild.

Housing should just be viewed as your guinea pigs' 'bedroom' and be permanently attached to a much larger run. These little rodents are active for up to 20 hours a day and sleep only for short periods, so they need plenty of space to exercise. If a ramp connects the hutch to a run, check it is wide enough and not too steep or your piggies may be too scared to use it.

As guinea pigs are a prey species, it's essential to provide lots of safe hiding places in their exercise area – such as pipes, tunnels and guinea pig nest boxes – where they can escape if they feel afraid. Deep piles of hay will allow for natural tunnelling behaviour.

The housing should also have toilet areas separate to their sleeping area, you can use bedding hay or straw and or a paper based, non-expanding litter.

Outdoor guinea pigs

Guinea pigs can be housed outdoors. They just need to be protected from hot weather in the summer and poor weather in the winter. When the weather is particularly bad, don't put them in an outdoor run. As they're so small their bodies are really close to the ground, so they'll easily get wet. Instead, pop them inside or in an outdoor shed – all guinea pig proofed of course!

In better weather, keep your guinea pigs' housing and run out of direct sunlight and fill it with places to hide. Guinea pigs are prey animals so like to feel secure and that they have somewhere to hide away.

Keeping guinea pigs outdoors means they may encounter predators, such as foxes. Keep your guinea pigs' housing secure by using good quality wire and bolts. Also, certain garden chemicals, such as pesticides, can be poisonous. Make sure your guinea pigs are kept away from any areas that could contain these chemicals.

Guinea pigs don't like cold weather, so in winter, move their accommodation somewhere warmer, such as into a shed, porch or utility room and give them plenty of extra bedding to help keep them nice and cosy.

Indoors

Guinea pigs can be kept indoors, but it is important that you gradually get your guinea pigs used to common household sights sounds and noises.

All areas that your guinea pigs move around in should be fully proofed to ensure that they are safe and protected from hazards. For example, all electric cables should be covered to stop your guinea pigs from chewing on them and any house plants should either be safe for guinea pigs or kept out of the way. You should also make sure the flooring is non-slip as slippery floors can cause injury and stress.

Your guinea pigs should also be kept away from radiators and their space should be kept well ventilated, the temperature for your guineas' housing should ideally be kept at between 17-20 degrees Celsius – some warmer areas of your house may be too hot. You should have a toilet area for each of your guineas which is separate from their bedding area. It's also important that you provide plenty of enrichment through toys, platforms, hay and grass plants.

Housekeeping



Daily tasks

- Clean out toilet area
- Remove soiled bedding
- Wash food and water containers
- Replace fresh hay and water
- Remove any old uneaten food

Weekly tasks

- Remove and replace all bedding
- Place a small amount of old bedding back into the area for a familiar smell for your piggies

Monthly tasks

- Remove everything and clean thoroughly
- Clean the housing with animal safe cleaner
- Replace bedding



Companionship & bonding



Guinea pigs love to live in single sex pairs or groups. Plus, they'll also love being around you!

Due to their highly social nature, guinea pigs can only be truly happy as one of a pair or as part of a small group of the same sex – litter mates make the best companions. If you're planning to keep a male and female together, it's recommended that the male is neutered to avoid the unwanted patter of tiny guinea pig feet.



Guinea Pigs enjoy interaction with humans too so it is important that you make lots of time daily to interact with them.

Never keep guineas with rabbits or chinchillas as they all have different housing and nutrition requirements. Bullying between species can occur and rabbits can give guinea pigs serious diseases.

Bonding with your guinea pigs

You can have a great relationship with your guinea pigs. It can just take a bit of time to get used to one another. Firstly, make sure to give your pets time to settle into their new surroundings. When you approach their housing, speak softly and quietly and let them know you're there. Don't try to hold them straight away, let them get used to your voice first, and then slowly start to offer them some treats. Don't put your hand straight into their cage as this can scare them! Instead, when they're out and about during the daytime, try sitting next to them so they can used to you being around.

With some patience you'll have a great relationship with your little guinea pigs!

Handling your guinea pigs

It's easy to scare your guinea pigs when you approach them, so it's best to crouch down and talk softly as you get nearer. Let your pets come to you – offer your hand to sniff, then gently place your hand across their shoulder with the thumb tucked between the front legs on one side.

You should then be able to slowly lift your guinea pigs and support their weight by putting your other hand under the bottom. You should then hold your pets on your lap or, if you're standing, close to your chest.

Behaviour



Guinea pigs are small but full of life. Gentle and lively, understanding their behaviour will help you have a great relationship with your guinea pigs.

Guinea pigs are small and gentle-natured, but lively too. They love being handled and rarely bite or scratch.

They are curious and can be very vocal! They communicate using several noises, including the well-known 'wheek-wheek' call – a sign of excitement or to find a friend – and a low 'purring' sound, which they make when they are feeling content and chilled out. They also make a series of short 'putt-putt' noises when they are exploring.

Guinea pigs like to play, so make sure there are plenty of toys for them. Play makes them exercise, which is good for their physical health, and keeps them contented, which is good for keeping them happy and healthy.

Guinea pigs are natural foragers, so hide some food and your pets will enjoy looking for it. For example, try hiding some Excel Nature Snacks around their hutch or in Excel Feeding Hay. In addition to providing nutrition, foraging mimics their natural behaviour, keeps them occupied and prevents boredom.

As guinea pigs are naturally prey animals, they need constant access to hiding places where they can go and be alone if they feel scared. In the wild, they live in close family groups of five to 10 individuals, though several groups may live in close proximity, forming a colony. Being a small animal, guinea pigs face all sorts of challenges and have many natural predators, which is why they avoid open areas without shelter and are on constant alert against potential dangers.

They scent mark their stuff. Guinea pigs scent mark by rubbing their chin or cheeks across things, which helps keep their home smelling familiar and reassuring. This is why it's important to make sure that you transfer some of the old bedding back into their accommodation when cleaning. They also drag their bottoms across the ground to leave scent secretions as messages, which are only understood by other guinea pigs.

They only sleep for short periods. Although crepuscular creatures, who are most active during dusk and dawn, guinea pigs are awake for up to 20 hours of the day. This means they need constant access to food, water, companion guinea pigs, safe hiding places and toys to keep them occupied, as well as an exercise area with tubes to tunnel along, shelters to hide in and deep areas of hay to forage in and nibble on.

Fun Fact

When they are excited, guinea pigs can jump straight up and down, often turning 90° in mid-air, performing a slick little move known as 'pop-corning'.



If one of your guinea pigs shows a change in behaviour or in their eating or drinking patterns you should seek the advice of a vet as soon as possible!

A healthy guinea pig is alert and chatty, with bright eyes and a good coat. It's essential to know exactly how they look and act when they're fit and healthy – that way, it's much easier to spot the subtle changes in behaviour and appetite that reveal something's not quite right.

As with all healthcare issues, prevention is better than cure – and dealing with problems early can make all the difference to your pet enjoying a speedy recovery or becoming very poorly.

To do the very best by your guinea pigs, make regular visits to your vet for routine health checks. This will ensure the early detection of clinical diseases and allow your vet to give more effective treatments.

Common health problems

Dental Disease

Guinea pigs' teeth grow constantly throughout their lives. Being fed the correct, nugget-based diet along with plenty of things to chew on, is really important to ensure that the length of their teeth is kept in check. In addition, guinea pigs need constant access to fibrous materials to chew throughout the day, such as tasty Excel Feeding Hay with Dandelion & Marigold to keep both their digestive system and their gnashers in good condition.

In fact, the importance of feeding a correct diet really can't be overstated as this simple measure prevents many health complaints in guinea pigs. When cavies are fed the wrong foods, or are not given appropriate things to chew on, they will quickly develop dental problems. As well as causing pain, this will make eating difficult for them, which can lead to further health issues.

Dental problems can include:

- **Incisors that do not align**, which can become so long that they become embedded in the nose, lips, gums or tongue.
- **Overgrown molars** that can wear unevenly and develop sharp spurs that can lacerate the tongue and cheeks. Their tongue can also get trapped under overgrown molars.

- **Malocclusion** (where teeth overlap and don't align properly), which can be inherited and occur at any point while the guinea pig is growing (up to 12-18 months) or develop later in life.

Pododermatitis

Wild guinea pigs live virtually their entire lives on grass and never have to walk across hard or rough surfaces. However, within a domestic environment, hard surfaces or wire mesh cages that are not suitably covered can result in swollen paws and the development of pressure sores on the soles of their feet, leading to a condition known as 'bumblefoot', or pododermatitis, to give it its medical name. As well as being very uncomfortable for your pet, if left untreated, it can spread to the bone tissue of the feet and legs.

You can prevent foot issues by always ensuring that the flooring of your guinea pigs' accommodation is covered with soft, comfortable Timothy hay. When you take your guinea pigs out to socialise with them, never put them down on hard surfaces. Always opt for grass or something soft and cushioned.

Guinea pig nails grow quickly and need trimming every couple of weeks or so. Ask your vet to show you the correct and safe way to do this.

Vitamin C deficiency

Guinea pigs cannot make their own Vitamin C, so they need to get this from their diet or they can suffer all manner of health issues.

If your guinea pigs don't get enough of this vital vitamin in their diet, their body's supply will quickly run out, leaving them vulnerable to a nasty disease called scurvy – a condition common among sailors of old who travelled long distances without access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Scurvy interferes with the body's ability to manufacture collagen, which is important for bone and tissue formation, and can lead to problems in your guinea pigs' joints and skin.

However, even when they are getting enough vitamin C in their diet, some guinea pigs can still develop a vitamin C deficiency, particularly if they are suffering from another illness or physical problem that either prevents them from eating enough or being able to absorb the vitamin properly.

Symptoms of vitamin c deficiency:

- Weak and lacking in energy
- Difficulty in walking due to swollen joints
- Spots or subcutaneous bleeding just under the surface of the skin
- Small wounds that bleed excessively or don't heal as rapidly as usual
- Poor skin and fur condition
- Discharge from the eyes and/or nose
- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Teeth grinding
- Diarrhoea

If your guinea pigs show any of these signs, consult your vet immediately and they will be able to determine if the cause is Vitamin C deficiency, or whether it's due to something else, and recommend appropriate treatment.

Fleas and mites

Guinea pigs can suffer from fleas and lice and are particularly susceptible to developing mite infestations. Symptoms include itchy skin that your piggies will scratch constantly, which can lead to hair loss and sore patches. Mites can successfully be treated by your vet. It's important to treat not only the affected guinea pig, but any others that they have come into contact with too. Their accommodation, tunnels, and toys will also need to be cleaned thoroughly and bedding replaced to prevent a further infestation. Constant scratching may break the skin and cause a secondary infection. Your vet can prescribe antibiotics to clear this up.

Ringworm

Symptoms include hair loss, crusty lesions on the skin and excessive itching. Scabs are most commonly found around the head, face and ears but do spread across the back and legs. Your vet can prescribe a course of anti-fungal medication to get rid of the infection.

Flystrike

Flystrike is a potentially fatal condition which occurs when flies lay their eggs around a guinea pig's bottom. The eggs then hatch into maggots which mature and eat away at the surrounding flesh. It sounds horrible and it is. In the summer, this whole process can take as little as a few hours, so it's advisable that guinea pigs are checked at least twice a day. If you think your pet has flystrike, call your vet immediately. They will be able to clip away the fur, remove the maggots, administer antibiotics to help prevent infection.



Colds

A common health problem for guinea pigs is colds, often resulting from drafts, dampness or temperature fluctuations. While the cold itself may not be too serious, it can quickly develop into pneumonia, which requires urgent veterinary treatment in the form of antibiotics. Always ensure your guinea pigs are kept in a draft-free space and replace bedding frequently so it doesn't get damp and chilly. While guinea pigs enjoy time outdoors in the summer, they should never be kept outside during the winter months.



Grooming

While long-haired guinea pigs require a daily brush to keep their coats tangle and matt-free, shorthaired varieties only need a weekly onceover as part of their regular grooming routine.

Lumps and bumps

All animals can develop tumours, but guinea pigs seem to be more prone to skin and mammary tumours. All lumps should be checked by a vet. Most are harmless and can be removed in a simple surgical procedure, but if your vet is concerned, they can carry out further tests.

Health checks

All guinea pigs need their eyes, ears and noses checked regularly to make sure there isn't any unusual discharge. Watch out for any scratching or rubbing of ears or head shaking, as this could mean ear mites.

Guinea pigs' teeth grow very quickly and should be checked every week to ensure they are not overgrown, broken or loose.

Feet should be checked for signs of sores or red patches and nails need to be carefully clipped regularly or they will start to curl. If you notice anything unusual during grooming, always speak to your vet.

Fun Fact

Guinea pigs have four toes on their front feet, but only three on their back ones!





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