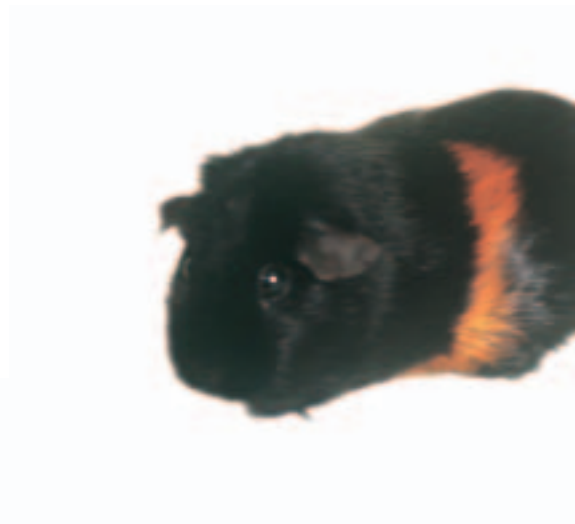


# All About Pets

*The national pet care information service*



## CARING FOR YOUR GUINEA PIG



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*

*Guinea pigs – or cavies, to give them their proper name – are fascinating, intelligent and when handled correctly, friendly.*

They originate from South America and there are eight species, but only one, the domestic cavy, is kept as a pet.

On average, guinea pigs live from four to eight years, so their care is a long-term commitment. Males are known as boars and females are called sows. Guinea pigs need company and can be kept in same sex groups or pairs, but if you're planning to keep a male and female together, talk to your vet about having the male neutered to avoid unwanted babies.



The best way to buy a guinea pig is from a reputable breeder and a youngster should be between six and twelve weeks old. If you buy from a pet shop, make sure that the animals have been kept in same sex groups and that the staff know how to tell the males from the females!

## Home comforts

Guinea pigs are curious and like to see what is going on, so can be kept indoors or out. However, they have sensitive hearing, so unless your home is quiet are usually best outdoors. They need a large predator-proof wooden or wire cage, though a wire cage should have a plastic floor to prevent injury. Each cage should have a separate sleeping area where the guinea pigs can retreat out of sight to get some peace and quiet. The cage should be housed out of direct sunlight (guinea pigs are susceptible to heat stroke), in a weatherproof, draught-proof shed. Do not keep guinea pigs – or any other animals – in a garage, as vehicle fumes can kill.

The best form of bedding is shredded paper or wheat straw. If you use wood shavings they must be dust-free and you should avoid cedar shavings, which can cause health problems. Never use fluffy bedding, as it may wrap around limbs and injure your pet. Also, it will not dissolve if eaten.

## Food for thought

As guinea pigs are naturally grazing animals, it is important that they always have quality, non-dusty hay to keep their digestive systems working, along with a guinea pig mix. They also need small quantities of fruit and vegetables as a source of vitamin C – guinea pigs lack the enzyme to produce this. Melon, oranges and dark green, leafy vegetables such as spinach, broccoli, kale and cabbage are all good sources. Alternatively, you can buy vitamin C to add direct to your guinea pigs' water. Put food in earthenware bowls, which are hard to tip over, or stainless steel ones clipped to the front of wire cages. Clean, fresh water from a gravity bottle must be available at all times.

## Health matters

A healthy guinea pig is alert, with bright eyes and a good coat. One of the most common problems in guinea pigs is bumblefoot, where the foot becomes swollen, due to a bacterial infection. They are also prone to eye problems, so it's important to use dust-free bedding. Other conditions to watch out for include mange (itchy skin), teeth problems due to a diet that's too low in fibre and vitamin C and obesity due to being fed too many treats. If you have any concerns about your guinea pigs' health, seek your vet's advice.

## Exercise and entertainment

Provide your guinea pigs with as large a floor space as possible – each needs a minimum of 900 sq cms. They will enjoy the extra space provided by a safe outdoor run that will allow them to graze, and they can also be allowed to run free indoors under supervision. Make sure all doors are closed, that there are no 'escape holes' and that cats and dogs are kept out of the room. Guinea pigs are not usually interested in toys, though some enjoy exploring cardboard boxes and going through tubes or pipes. You could also try hiding small amounts of food around the cage to help keep your guinea pigs alert and active.

## Company

The only companion for your pet should be another guinea pig. Do not keep guinea pigs in the same hutch as rabbits, as there is a risk that the guinea pigs will be bullied. The best set-up is a pair or small group of the same sex, although neutered males and females may get along.

## Getting to know you

Guinea pigs are friendly and most are happy to be handled once they have got used to their new surroundings. Always use both hands to pick a guinea pig up. Place one hand across its shoulders with the thumb tucked behind the shoulder and fingers wrapped round the ribs. Hold it just tightly enough to be secure, without squeezing, and put your other hand underneath the hindquarters for support.

As guinea pigs are active in the daytime, you will have lots of fun watching them. They communicate vocally and different noises have different meanings. A cooing sound gives reassurance, whilst a squeak can be a warning – a sign that the guinea pig is frightened, or anticipation that food is coming!

## Don't forget

- Guinea pigs have a long lifespan, compared to other small animals
- Guinea pigs need company of their own kind, either a pair or small group of the same sex
- Don't keep a breeding pair unless you can guarantee to find good homes for the litter. If you're planning to keep a male and female together, talk to your vet about having the male neutered.
- Don't keep guinea pigs and rabbits in the same hutch, as the guinea pigs may be bullied
- Make sure your guinea pigs always have dust-extracted hay, to keep their digestive system working, and a constant supply of clean water

## Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit [www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk), the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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