Guinea Pigs

The guinea pig or cavy (pronounced kay-vee) is a member of the rodent family, closely related to the chinchilla and the porcupine.

In the grasslands and lower slopes of the Andes Mountains in South America, wild guinea pigs live in family groups of five to ten individuals. Being a prey species, they have very sensitive hearing and a good sense of smell. When startled, they respond quickly by running for cover. They are most active at dawn and dusk, feeding on grasses, seeds, leaves, stems and roots.

Several hundred years ago when European explorers traveled to South America, they returned home with guinea pigs. Because of their affectionate nature, they soon became popular pets in both Europe and North America. Today, there are more than 10 breeds of guinea pigs, with many different coat types and colour combinations. There are even two hairless varieties! Skinny pigs only have hair on their heads and lower legs, while Baldwins are born with hair but lose it all by the time they are weaned as babies.

Like people, each guinea pig is unique. Some are outgoing, while others are shy. Either way, guinea pigs make wonderful companions. They are gentle animals who rarely nip, and are generally quiet – though they do have a range of calls and chatters, especially at mealtimes! Guinea pigs are known to grunt, squeal, whistle and chirp. They will even make purring sounds when they are being petted and feeling content on your lap.

The ideal guardian for a guinea pig is someone who is willing to provide a large, interesting habitat, as well as plenty of out-of-cage exercise, fresh food and water, and of course some quiet lap time.

Are you that someone?

Guinea Pig Stats

- **Origin:** South America
- **Status:** Domesticated more than 4,500 years ago
- **Life Span:** Usually 5 to 7 years
- **Size:** Weigh up to about 1 kg and measure 20 to 30 cm in length
- **Coat:** Comes in a variety of “styles,” from short and smooth to long and curly
- **Colour:** Many different colours and patterns, like chocolate or “Dalmatian” (coloured spots on white)
Be a great guinea pig guardian!

Guinea pigs are friendly and gentle pets, requiring a patient guardian. Here are just some of the care and welfare needs of guinea pigs. The pet care section of the BC SPCA website – spca.bc.ca – has more detailed guinea pig care information.

Veg out
Guinea pigs are herbivores, meaning they only eat plants. Feed a small amount of fresh fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C daily – peppers, parsley, spinach, kale and papayas are all good. Vitamin C is important for guinea pig health.

Pellets, please!
Be sure to feed pellets specific to guinea pigs because they have added vitamin C.

Hey, don’t forget hay!
Let your guinea pigs munch away on Timothy hay to their heart’s content! Hay helps with digestion. Avoid alfalfa, though – it’s too rich for most guinea pigs.

Healthy pigs
Be familiar with how your guinea pigs normally look and behave. Take them to the vet as soon as you notice anything unusual, like diarrhea, breathing problems or loss of appetite.

Spa treatment
Guinea pigs need to have their nails trimmed every four to six weeks. Have an adult do this! Nail trimming can be tricky because if you cut them too short, the nails can bleed and be painful.

Long-haired guinea pigs need to have their hair brushed regularly. And though guinea pigs do groom themselves, you can give your guinea pig a bath once in a while if he is smelly or greasy. Use warm water and a mild pet shampoo. Make sure you keep his face dry and rinse out all of the shampoo. Dry him off with a towel.

Cavy condos
Guinea pigs need a living area that is at least 65 cm by 65 cm per guinea pig, with walls about 30 cm high. They don’t climb or jump very well, so the enclosure can be open on top – unless you also happen to have a cat or a dog at home! The cage should be flat and solid, not mesh or wire, which can hurt their feet.

Cover the cage floor with aspen wood shavings, carefresh® (bedding made from recycled paper) or a thick, clean blanket. Do not use cedar or pine shavings because they can cause health problems. Keep the cage in an area protected from cold drafts and direct sunlight. Scoop soiled shavings daily. Clean the entire cage at least once a week. A clean, dry cage will help keep your guinea pigs healthy.

Add a jungle gym
Within the cage, add small wooden or plastic houses, as well as cardboard or plastic tubes large enough for your guinea pigs to run through. These will help prevent boredom and make them feel secure.

Wood is good
To help wear down their ever-growing teeth, provide your guinea pigs with chewing items such as wooden toys and apple or aspen branches. Just make sure the branches come from trees that haven’t been treated with any chemicals.

Buddy up!
Guinea pigs love company. Two can live together as long as they are the same sex and have a large enough living space. Never keep males and females together, even for a short period (unless they are neutered or spayed)!

Thirsty pigs
Guinea pigs should always have fresh water available to them through a sipper bottle. Change the water daily and clean the bottle with soap and water once a week.

Room to run
Guinea pigs require exercise and will happily romp around a room that has been cleared of hazards such as electrical cords, cats or dogs, and poisonous plants. They love to run along walls and hide under furniture. You should let your guinea pigs have time out of their habitat every day in a safe, enclosed area.

Handle with care
Many guinea pigs like to be held, but must be handled gently and carefully. Always pick up your guinea pig with two hands; one hand under her hind end and the other around her chest. Hold her while you are sitting down, preferably on the floor, so that she will not be injured if she does fall.

PHOTO: CRYSTAL RITCHIE
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Cover the cage floor with aspen wood shavings, carefresh® (bedding made from recycled paper) or a thick, clean blanket. Do not use cedar or pine shavings because they can cause health problems. Keep the cage in an area protected from cold drafts and direct sunlight. Scoop soiled shavings daily. Clean the entire cage at least once a week. A clean, dry cage will help keep your guinea pigs healthy.

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