



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 of Peru, wild guinea pigs live in family groups of five to 10 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, fruits and roots.

A few 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 13 breeds of guinea pigs, with many different coat types and multiple colour combinations. There are even two hairless varieties: “skinny pigs,” who only have hair on their heads and lower legs, and “Baldwins,” who 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, squeak, wheek 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 over 5,000 years ago
- Life Span: Usually five to seven 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 straight to long and curly
- Colour: Many different colours and patterns, like lemon yellow or “Dalmatian” (black spots on white)



10 Care tips for Guinea Pigs

Here are just some of the things you need to know to be the best guinea pig guardian! The pet care section of the BC SPCA website – sPCA.bc.ca – has additional information on guinea pig care.



1. Veg out!

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



Pellet food too!

Be sure to feed pellets specific to guinea pigs because they're fortified with 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.

2. Wood is good

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



3. 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. Since they don't climb or jump, the enclosure can be open on top – unless you also happen to have a cat or a dog at home! The cage can be made out of wood, metal or plastic. The bottom should be flat and solid, not mesh or wire, which can hurt their feet.



8. Room to run

Guinea pigs require exercise and will happily romp around a room that has been cleared of hazards such as electric 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.

9. 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 periodically give your guinea pig a bath 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.



7. Love and attention

Guinea pigs like to be cuddled, 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.



6. 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)!



5. 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.

4. 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.





But wait, there's more!

This booklet provides basic care information. Please visit spca.bc.ca/animalcare for more detailed information on guinea pig care. Consult your veterinarian, as well as one of the many care books available at book stores, pet supply stores or your public library. Look for ones that describe nutrition, health issues, grooming and guinea pig behaviour.

Home, sweet home

The cages sold at most pet supply stores don't provide guinea pigs with much space to eat, sleep, play and go to the bathroom. Cramped living quarters can cause your guinea pigs to become bored and frustrated. Read our step-by-step guide to building a large, inexpensive habitat on our guinea pig care section online. The bigger your habitat, the happier your guinea pigs will be!

The great outdoors

Guinea pigs should never be kept outdoors permanently, but when the weather is nice, try taking them outside for some exercise. Place your guinea pigs out

on untreated grass inside a pen or under a wire cage top. Don't leave them unattended! Be sure they have a small shelter they can retreat to for shade and hiding. You can add tubes and boxes to make it more interesting, but many guinea pigs are content just to munch away on grass and dandelion leaves!

The guinea pig guardian pledge

As their guardian, you are responsible for your guinea pigs' health and well-being. You should make sure:

- ✓ They never go hungry or thirsty;
- ✓ They are taken to the vet when they are sick or injured;
- ✓ They are not afraid all the time;
- ✓ They are comfortable in their surroundings;
- ✓ They are free to behave like guinea pigs!

For more information on providing these "Five Freedoms," check out spca.bc.ca/animalcare.

Bring on the Yummy veggies!



Not much room to move in here!



Make the **BCSPCA** your first adoption option! Visit spca.bc.ca to view all adoptable guinea pigs.

Ready, set, grow!

LINDA MACKIE



Small animals such as rabbits and guinea pigs LOVE fresh greens to eat. So why not grow your own, right at home? You don't need a huge backyard – a balcony, a porch or even a windowsill will do.

Where to start

Just head to your local garden centre to pick up some seeds. Follow the instructions on the seed packets for how deep to plant them and how much sun and water they'll need.

You can also get plants that have already sprouted. That way, you won't have to wait as long to get harvesting!

What to grow

Herbs and dark, leafy greens are great choices. Try these favourites:

WHEATGRASS

Wheatgrass seeds are sometimes called "wheat berries" but, rest assured, they're seeds! Once planted, they'll sprout quickly and be ready to harvest in about a week. Clip off what you need, and the grass will grow back a second time. Indoors, wheatgrass can be grown at any time of year.

You can also share wheatgrass with your cats!

KALE

Kale is a good source of vitamin C, which is great news for guinea pigs who need this vitamin in their diet. Kale prefers well-drained, fertile soil and plentiful, consistent moisture. Once the plants mature, pick leaves from the bottom up as you need them.

Kale is cold-hardy, so it can be grown outdoors in the winter too.

MINT

Mint is an easy herb to grow, and it smells delicious! It spreads easily and can take over a garden, so you might want to stick to growing it in a pot. Mint does best in partial shade in rich, moist soil. Clip off leaves or sprigs as you need them, and the plant will grow right back.

DANDELIONS

That's right – dandelions! Small animals love them, and growing them is a breeze. Use a pot if your parents aren't keen on the idea of your garden being taken over by these cheerful yellow flowers.

When dandelions are in the white puffball stage, take the seeds and press them gently into the soil. Keep the soil moist. Sow some every two weeks or so for a constant supply of tasty leaves and flowers (both are edible!).

HELP YOUR PETS, HELP THE PLANET

Gardening is not only a great way to help feed your pets, it's awesome for the environment too! Vegetables and herbs can attract beneficial insects, including pollinators such as bees and butterflies.





Don't forget the FIVE FREEDOMS!

Take a moment to think about the Five Freedoms before you make a purchase:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
3. Freedom from distress
4. Freedom from discomfort
5. Freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being

Ask yourself questions like: Could this product **hurt** my pet or make him **uncomfortable** in any way? Does this product allow my pet to express herself, or will it just make her **nervous**?

If you're at all unsure, **skip it!** You might need to do more research to make sure it's right for your furry friend.

LET'S GO SHOPPING!

Your guide to buying small animal supplies



STAY AWAY!

Yogurt drops

These sweet treats have way more sugar than small animals need!



For a healthier snack, try small pieces of banana instead.

Wire wheels

Tails and toes can easily get caught between the rungs. Ouch!



Stick with wheels that have solid surfaces – like ones made of plastic. They're safer and more comfortable.

Cotton fluff

Hamsters, rats, mice and gerbils love to make nests. But cotton fluff has small threads that can wrap around and seriously injure their legs and feet.



Toilet paper and strips of newspaper are a safer option for nesting materials.

Pine and cedar shavings

Pine and cedar smell nice to us, but they can cause breathing issues in small animals.



Recycled paper bedding and aspen shavings are good alternatives.



Exercise balls

Not all hamsters enjoy running around in a ball. Plus, it's easy for them to get stuck in a corner and forgotten – or accidentally kicked!



A better choice? Set up an exercise area where small animals can roam around freely and safely.





BE CAREFUL!

Chew toys

Small animals can enjoy gnawing on toys made from a variety of materials such as wood and dried hay. But remember: any toy can become dangerous when too much of it gets eaten or it falls apart!



Seed mixes

Rats, mice, gerbils and hamsters are huge seed fans. But feed them too many and they'll end up fat and unhealthy! High quality pellets should make up most of their diet.

Be sure to check toys for damage, and throw them out when they're no longer safe.

Cardboard – like toilet paper and paper towel rolls – makes a great, safe (and free!) chew item for small animals.



Seeds can be given in small amounts as treats.



GO FOR IT!

Treat balls

Rats, guinea pigs and rabbits can quickly learn to roll these balls around and gobble up the food that falls out. This keeps their minds and bodies active!

Exercise pens

Exercise pens made just for small animals have narrow bars to prevent escape (or no bars at all!). Fill a pen with lots of objects for them to crawl over, under and through. This lets them safely explore the world outside their cage. They'll still need supervision, of course.



Know before you go

When shopping for small animal supplies, keep these two things in mind:

1. Just because a store sells a product doesn't mean that product is safe for animals.

Sadly, some products are downright dangerous for our pets. That's why it's important to do your research first. Talk to people who have the same type of pet as you. Read product reviews online to learn about potential safety concerns.

2. Products are marketed to people, not pets.

After all, we're the ones buying them! We're often drawn to a product because the label catches our eye or we like the colours it comes in. But just because we want it doesn't mean our pets need it.