



AVIAN REPTILE & EXOTIC PET HOSPITAL

GUINEA PIG - GENERAL HEALTH CARE

INTRODUCTION

Guinea Pigs make great pets for children and adults. They are curious, responsive and lots of fun. The key to a happy and healthy guinea pig is the right diet, exercise and housing.

They do not belong to the pig family and they don't come from Guinea. They belong to the rodent family and originate from the Andes. They are also known as Cavy.



DIET

A high fibre diet can be achieved by feeding 80% fresh hay and grass. Guinea pigs need good quality, fresh green pasture, meadow, oaten, timothy or other suitable grass hay. Feed about the size of your guinea pig's body in hay daily. Only feed lucerne hay (a legume not a grass) to guinea pigs under six months old and breeding females as it is high in calcium and protein and low in fibre.

Hay is so important because it keeps guinea pigs constantly growing teeth nice and short and it provides roughage to keep the gastrointestinal tract working efficiently. Access to grazing is ideal. Exercise will aid your pet's digestion and prevent obesity.

The rest of the diet should consist of no more than 1/8 cup of good quality (25% fibre) guinea pig pellets (that contains stabilised vitamin C or if you can't get these, provide pellets and a small cube size of citrus, kiwifruit or tomato once daily as guinea pigs cannot make their own Vitamin C) and 1 cup of vegetables daily. Feed leafy greens such as Asian greens, celery, spinach and herbs such as parsley. Feed a few vegetables regularly and introduce new vegetables gradually, to avoid diarrhoea, bloat and gut upset. Avoid large amounts of very fresh green clover and toxic plants such as oleander, lily of the valley and rhubarb leaves.

HOUSING

Guinea pigs are social animals and are best kept in groups. They can be successfully kept indoors and outdoors in large enclosures. The ideal is a combination of both.

Outside enclosures can be a large fenced area where they can graze, exercise and lie in the sun with a dry and draught-free sheltered area where they can hide from predators (such as cats, dog, foxes and birds of prey) and be warm in the cooler months. A covered, well ventilated area should also be available for the summer months. While guinea pigs can tolerate a wide range of temperatures the ideal temperature range is between 12° and 20°C. Temperatures in excess of 27°C can lead to heatstroke.

Indoor guinea pigs should be taken out of their enclosures regularly to allow exercise and interaction with their owners. They should be exposed to direct sunshine for 20 minutes at least 2-3 times per week. A mobile hutch with a wire bottom to allow grazing on lawn grass is great (make sure you haven't sprayed the grass with chemicals).

As guinea pigs like to gnaw, careful consideration should be given to the materials that you construct their house in. Avoid treated pine products.

BEHAVIOUR

Guinea pigs are inquisitive and interactive provided you have gained their trust. Children should be taught to handle guinea pigs gently, supporting the body when picked up. Supervision of young children is vital. A guinea pig that is not securely held soon learns to struggle when picked up. Guinea pigs can be taught to come when called for food rewards and will love to be petted and stroked on your lap.

Groom your guinea pig daily. This can be great for bonding, reduces matting and hairballs and ensures that you can check for any dirty bottoms!

PURCHASING

When purchasing a guinea pig there are a few things that you can check for to make sure that they are as healthy as possible. A guinea pig should not be too thin or too over weight. The coat should be well groomed with no bald or red patches of skin.

The eyes, ears and nose should be clean with no signs of discharge. If you can, check to see that the teeth are not overgrown and there is no signs of drooling. Look at the rear end for signs of soiling.

Observe the animal to make sure it is walking OK and check that the enclosure is clean with fresh food and water. Ask the owner (preferably a recommended breeder) plenty of questions about what they feed how they care for them and if they know the sex.

DISEASE PREVENTION

The most common causes of disease in pet guinea pigs are related to poor diet. Dental disease can be devastating in guinea pigs as they have continuously growing teeth. Overgrown teeth and root impaction can be painful and result in nasty dental abscesses.

Dental disease, gastrointestinal disease and urinary stones are very common in pet guinea pigs that are fed on high energy, low fibre diets made up of mainly pelleted mixes, grains and carrots.

Guinea pigs are very prone to foot problems which results from obesity, pregnancy and hard flooring in the home and enclosure. Providing bedding material such as blankets and towels on hard surfaces can prevent this problem.

Faecal or urine soiling is an indicator of disease and this area can become fly blown. If you notice this take your guinea pig to the vet for a checkup.

Desex your guinea pig. Desexing prevents unwanted pregnancies and allows your males and females to live together in harmony.

Take your guinea pig to the vet for a health check every year. Older guinea pigs or those with dental problems may need more frequent visits.

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