



Guinea Pigs

You want your new pets to be happy – and so do we. So we've put together this guide to caring for guinea pigs, which is handy if you already have guinea pigs or are thinking about getting some. Guinea pigs can make good pets for adults, and for children with supervision. They're happiest living with another guinea pig friend or friends. They are inquisitive and intelligent animals who, if you get to know them when they're young and they learn to trust you, can be friendly and sociable with people.

Likely to live: around 5-6 years, with some living longer.

Guinea pigs can be kept indoors or outdoors. Whichever you choose, they need a lot of space, a big shelter and a roomy living area. The shelter is somewhere for your guinea pigs to rest, hide and feel safe. This area needs to be large enough for all your guinea pigs to rest together, and to spend time apart if they wish. Cover the floor with some newspaper or dust-free wood shavings, then make it even cosier with lots of warm, comfy hay.

The living area should be large enough for your guinea pigs to run, jump, explore, graze, forage and explore. Your guinea pigs should ideally have access to the living area at all times as they are very active for up to 20 hours each day and only sleep for short periods of time. Add tunnels and tubes, and give them plenty of hiding spaces, where they can enjoy some quiet time when they want to.

Guinea pig housework

Clean your shelter once a week with pet friendly disinfectant. Change the bedding, but pop some previous dry, unsoiled bedding back as familiar scents will help reassure your guinea pig. Any toilet areas need cleaning daily, and check their living areas every day to remove any uneaten food.

The right place

Guinea pigs can be kept outside or indoors, and their home needs to be strong and secure, away from drafts, yet able to let in fresh air and natural light. It also needs to be protected from extreme temperatures and secure enough to avoid guinea pigs escaping and stop predators from getting in. Indoor guinea pigs can be kept in a guinea pig playpen or a guinea pig-proofed

room (guinea pigs will chew so cover electrical wiring and remove or cover anything else you don't want chewed). They should be kept away from radiators and in a quiet place away from other pets. Guinea pigs will also enjoy regular outdoor time, especially when grazing on grass in a secure outside exercise area on a fine day.

For guinea pigs living outside, their home needs to be weatherproof and raised slightly off the ground to keep the floor dry and improve ventilation. When the weather gets colder, outdoor guinea pigs can be brought inside or into an unused garage or shed (but they will still need free access to an exercise area).

If your garage is used by vehicles, it must not be used for guinea pigs. Poisonous exhaust fumes can be very dangerous for your pets. If you can't move them somewhere warmer, make sure you give them lots of extra bedding to keep them cosy and cover their shelter to provide extra protection from the wind and rain.

Guinea pigs are usually happiest when living with at least one other friendly guinea pig. A good combination is a neutered male with one or more females or a pair or group of females. Males may squabble, although brothers who grew up together usually get along. Your vet can give you advice on neutering and introducing new guinea pigs.

Hooray for hay

For guinea pigs, grass and hay are vital. They should be the biggest part of their diet, with hay available whenever they want it. Good quality, dust-free hay not only helps your guinea pig's digestion but also helps prevent their continually growing teeth from overgrowing.

Uncut grass only

Guinea pigs love nibbling on fresh growing grass. An exercise area where they can graze is ideal. If this isn't possible, grow grass in trays for them. But never give them clippings from the lawnmower, as these can make guinea pigs seriously ill.

Fussy eaters

Guinea pigs can't produce vitamin C naturally and need a supplement. Specialist guinea pig foods are packed with all the essentials. However, if you feed them muesli mixes, they can pick out what they like and miss important nutrients. To avoid this from happening you can feed them a small measured daily amount of nuggets instead.

Happy tummies

As our guinea pigs are fed on Pets at Home nuggets, we recommend you do the same to prevent upset tummies from a change of diet. If you do want to change their food, do it slowly. Introduce new foods over 10 days or so and phase out their old food completely.

Going green

Guinea pigs enjoy munching on leafy greens or safe plants like broccoli, kale, herbs, and fresh dandelion leaves. High-sugar fruit and vegetables like carrots and apples should only be served as small, occasional treats. Avoid citrus fruits and stick to fresh food, as frozen foods could make your pet poorly.

Healthy guinea pigs

Guinea pigs are furry bundles of energy and should have constant access to a large exercise area where they can run, jump, explore, and forage to their hearts' content. They'll love deep areas of hay to burrow in, with tunnels and tubes where they can explore and hide. As guinea pigs are natural foragers, make dinnertime more fun by scattering their food or putting it in activity feeders.

A clean cage and a good diet, as well as regular veterinary check-ups, will help keep your guinea pigs healthy. But do check on them every day just to make sure.

Vet visits

Take your guinea pig to the vet for a health check-up at least once every year or, of course, if they seem distressed. Get to know how your pets look and behave normally so you can spot any problems early on.

Common concerns

Watch out for sneezing or sticky eyes, as they can be a sign of a respiratory problem. Eliminating draughts in your guinea pigs' pen and using dust-free bedding will help avoid this. Scaly skin and scabs around the nose and ear are symptoms of ringworms (humans can catch ringworm, too – so wash your hands after handling). To help prevent ringworm, feed your guinea pigs dark, green, leafy veg that's rich in vitamin C to boost their immunity and keep their home clean.

Other problems to look out for include diarrhoea, flystrike, dry or irritated skin, hair loss, and changes in behaviour or eating/drinking habits. See a vet if anything concerns you.

On the move

Travelling is stressful for guinea pigs and can make them ill. To calm them, move them together in a secure plastic carrier box. Pop in some familiar smelling bedding and toys to help them relax.

Good hair, teeth and nails

Regular grooming is a fun way to bond with your guinea pig and to check their health. Brush fur daily for long-haired guinea pigs or weekly for short-haired varieties. Check nails weekly and trim when you need to (your vet can show you how to do this). Look at their teeth weekly and follow up on any worries with your vet.

Health and hygiene

All pets can carry diseases, some of which can pass to people. Always clean your hands with soap and water after handling or feeding your pets, or cleaning their home and equipment, and ensure children do the same. Always supervise children to ensure they do not put pets (or objects that pets have been in contact with) near their mouths. It is best to avoid kissing your pet.

Children under 5, pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems should pay extra attention to hygiene when feeding, handling or cleaning out pets, their housing and accessories. Do not clean pet equipment with your normal washing up.

If you are ever bitten by a small animal, the bite wound should be promptly cleaned and disinfected before being covered by a waterproof dressing. Seek medical advice if you feel unwell following the bite. Full detailed guidance is available at the Public Health England website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pet-rats-mice-hamsters-reducing-the-risk-of-infection

Adopting guinea pigs

Caring for guinea pigs is a big responsibility. If you think you're ready, have researched their welfare needs and you are committed to caring for them for their whole lives, why not consider giving a home to one of the rescue guinea pigs at our 'Pets Foundation' centres, RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales and other animal charities.

The five welfare needs

A good home - Your guinea pig needs a suitable place to live with a large shelter and an exercise area

A healthy diet - The right food for a healthy, balanced diet and fresh water on tap

Ways to stay happy - The chance to do the things guinea pigs like to do with somewhere to hide away and toys to play with

The right company - Being with, or away from, other animals

Help to be healthy - Protection against pain, injury, suffering and disease

Pets bring so much joy to children and adults alike that they soon become a much-loved part of your family. But ownership is a big responsibility. There can be unexpected vet bills, and not every pet can be insured. So, please think carefully before buying one, and make sure you can afford the potential costs involved. Not only is it the right thing to do, but under animal welfare law, you're legally obliged as an owner to give your pet any care they might need during their lifetime.

Happy guinea pig checklist

- Large housing indoors/outdoors with a shelter and run
- Another guinea pig companion
- Safe wood shavings or other bedding/nesting materials
- Good quality, dust-free hay
- Pets at Home guinea pig nuggets
- Good supply of fresh leafy greens
- Tunnels, boxes and other places to hide and explore
- Ceramic food bowl or activity feeder
- Suitable water bottles or heavy bottomed bowl
- Bottle brush
- Gnawing sticks, wooden blocks or willow toys to chew on
- Pet-safe disinfectant
- Guinea pig nail clippers
- A book on guinea pigs
- Time every day for your new friend
- Local vet to register your guinea pigs with

Pets at Home

Visit your nearest pet care centre to pick up essentials for your guinea pig, or you can shop online at www.petsathome.com.

The Pets Foundation

Changes do happen, and if you can no longer care for a pet you've bought from us, please get in touch so we can try to rehome them. Never abandon your pet or let them loose in the wild.