



Guinea pig Care Sheet

Basic facts:

Guinea pigs are often referred to as **cavy** which is derived from their latin name *Cavia porcellus*.

The average life span is 5-8 years.

Guinea pigs are **social animals** and should be kept in pairs or herds. Males should always be neutered to reduce unwanted litters and aggression. It is ideal to group animals of a similar age and there should always be at least one neutered male in a herd.

Young children should be supervised when handling cavies – they are easily injured!

It is a popular belief that guinea pigs and rabbits should not be housed together due to the assumed risk of *Bordetella bronchiseptica* transmission. Interestingly this statement was never proven to be true and was consequently removed from the later edition of the textbook it was originally printed in ¹.

It is advisable to **trim the nails** every few months as they can become very long and ingrown.

Cavies are **coprophagic** which means they will be seen eating their own faeces at times.

Guinea pigs do not produce their own Vitamin C.

Enclosure:

The bigger the better! The enclosure of a pair should have a minimum of 120x60cm, but more space is necessary for proper care and enrichment. A large pen or free-roam time can help increase the space available to your guinea pigs for interactions and play.

The **floor** of an enclosure should be **solid** (no mesh!) and covered in **soft, clean, dust-free substrate** (such as straw or hay, cellulose/paper products) or fleece blankets. Do not use wood chips, wood shavings, sawdust, corncob or scented materials.

Good ventilation and regular cleaning are important to reduce the build-up of ammonia which can irritate the guinea pig's sensitive airways.

Hiding spaces (e.g. boxes, tented areas, Oxbow Timothy Bungalow) should be provided to reduce stress.

Enrichment/entertainment items are a great way to promote exercise and to keep your guinea pig mentally stimulated. You can buy toys made of natural, non-toxic, safe materials (e.g. Oxbow); willow wreaths and balls that can be stuffed with hay and treats; or even just fill an empty toilet paper roll with treats. Also promote foraging by hiding hay toppers and treats in amongst some fresh grass hay.



Diet:

A normal guinea pig's diet should comprise of:

- **80-90% fresh grass HAY** (oat, teff, timothy, meadow). Hay can be offered in unlimited quantities. Only use lucern (=alfalfa) hay in growing and pregnant guinea pigs!
- 5-10% fresh veggies and herbs
- 5% Pellets: Do not feed more than the recommended amount of pellets to your guinea pig. It is fine for the bowl to be empty after the pellets have been consumed! This is why it is crucial to buy only high-quality pellets that are packed with nutrients (e.g. Oxbow, Burgess) and are fortified with Vitamin C. **Do not use seed/muesli mixes** as these promote selective feeding and can cause health issues. **Do not feed rabbit pellets to a guinea pig.**
- Treats should only be fed sparingly (e.g. once per week). Safe fruits and veggies, or high-quality treats (e.g. Oxbow) are acceptable. Stay away from any treats containing sugar.

Hay should be provided at all times. It is key to preventing many diseases like diarrhoea, bumblefoot, and obesity. Cavies also need hay to help care for their teeth and for good, healthy gut flora.

Do not feed straw as it can lead to serious nutritional deficiencies. Straw can be used as bedding.

Water should always be available and changed daily. Do not use medications or vitamins in the water as your cavy may not drink the water if the taste or colour is altered. Water should be provided in a water bottle. Food bowls should be made from heavy, untipable ceramic bowls.

Vitamin C supplementation should be considered in any guinea pig that is growing, pregnant or showing signs of disease. It is also essential if lower quality foods are being fed or the food has been stored for a long time. Oxbow Vitamin C supplements are the ideal treat for these animals.

Health:

The **teeth** of cavies **grow continuously** throughout life. They need lots of fibre in their diet (hay!) to wear the teeth down to a healthy length.

Gut stasis is any decrease or cessation of appetite and defecation. **Guinea pigs should never stop eating.** If these symptoms occur it is considered an **emergency** and a veterinarian should be consulted as soon as possible. This can quickly turn into a life-threatening condition. It is advisable to have foods at home that can be syringe-fed in case of gut stasis to buy time until the vet visit (e.g. Oxbow Critical Care). Gas accumulation in the intestines can be the consequence of stasis and can quickly become life-threatening.

If your guinea pig is scratching themselves or showing signs of hairloss then this should be discussed with your guinea pig-savvy vet.



Obesity is often the unintended consequence of too many pellets and treats. It is crucial to identify when your guinea pig is overweight and implement a healthy feeding and exercise regime. Ask your exotic vet to give you advice and do regular weigh-ins. This can help prevent further health issues (e.g. bumblefoot).

Guinea pigs that do not receive enough Vitamin C in their diet can develop **scurvy**. This is a painful and debilitating disease.

Regularly check your cavy's feet for signs of redness, swelling or wounds.

Version April 29th 2023.

Information on this care sheet is the opinion of the creator. This care sheet will be adapted if updated information becomes available.

To order food and enrichment items you can contact Exotic Pets Overberg via whatsapp (071-142-2953) or email admin@exoticpetsoverberg.co.za. Or visit our online shop at www.exoticpetsoverberg.co.za

References:

1. Donnelly, T.M., Vella, D. (2021) Basic Anatomy, Physiology, and Husbandry of Rabbits. In: Quesenberry, K.E., Orcutt, C.J., Mans, C., Carpenter, J.W., eds. *Ferrets, Rabbits, and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery* (4th ed., p.145). Elsevier.