

Guinea Pig Care Sheet

Cavies cannot make their own vitamin C. Almost everything else follows from that.

Living With Guinea Pigs | The Enclosure | Diet | Health | Call Your Vet

At A Glance

LIFESPAN
5 to 8 years

COMPANY
Pairs or herds, never alone

ENCLOSURE
120 x 60cm minimum for a pair

DIET
80 to 90% grass hay

VITAMIN C
They cannot make their own

NAILS
Trim every few months

Living With Guinea Pigs

- Guinea pigs are often called **cavies**, from the latin name *Cavia porcellus*.
- The average lifespan is **5 to 8 years**.
- They are **social animals** and should be kept in pairs or herds. Neuter males, always, to prevent unwanted litters and aggression. Group animals of a similar age, and keep at least one neutered male in a herd.
- **Supervise young children** when they handle cavies. They are easily injured.
- It is widely believed that guinea pigs and rabbits should not be housed together because of *Bordetella bronchiseptica*. That claim was never proven and was removed from the later edition of the textbook it first appeared in.[1]
- **Trim the nails every few months.** Left alone they grow very long and become ingrown.
- Cavies are coprophagic, so you will see them eating their own faeces at times. That is normal.
- **Guinea pigs do not produce their own vitamin C.** It has to come from their food, which is why pellet quality matters so much for this species.

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The Enclosure

- **The bigger the better.** A pair needs a minimum of **120 x 60cm**, and more than that for proper care and enrichment. A large pen or supervised free-roam time gives them room to interact and play.
- The floor must be **solid, never mesh**, covered in soft, clean, dust-free substrate such as straw or hay, cellulose and paper products, or fleece blankets. **Do not use** wood chips, wood shavings, sawdust, corncob or anything scented.
- Good ventilation and regular cleaning keep ammonia from building up. Cavy airways are sensitive and ammonia irritates them.
- **Hiding spaces** reduce stress. Boxes, tented areas or an Oxbow Timothy Bungalow all work.
- **Enrichment** promotes exercise and keeps them mentally stimulated. Toys of natural, non-toxic, safe materials such as Oxbow, willow wreaths and balls stuffed with hay and treats, or an empty toilet roll filled with treats. Hide hay toppers and treats inside fresh grass hay to get them foraging.

Diet

- **80 to 90% fresh grass hay** (oat, teff, timothy, meadow), offered in unlimited quantities. Only use lucerne (alfalfa) hay for growing and pregnant guinea pigs.
- **5 to 10% fresh vegetables and herbs.**
- **5% pellets.** Never feed more than the recommended amount. It is fine for the bowl to be empty once the pellets are eaten, which is exactly why the pellets must be high quality, nutrient dense and **fortified with vitamin C** (Oxbow, Burgess). No seed or muesli mixes, they encourage selective feeding. **Never feed rabbit pellets to a guinea pig.**
- **Treats sparingly**, about once a week. Safe fruit and veg, or quality treats such as Oxbow. Nothing containing sugar.
- **Hay at all times.** It prevents diarrhoea, bumblefoot and obesity, wears the teeth down and keeps gut flora healthy. **Never feed straw**, it causes serious nutritional deficiencies. Straw is bedding.
- **Water** always available and changed daily, from a bottle. Do not put medications or vitamins in it, a change in taste or colour can stop your cavy drinking altogether. Food goes in heavy ceramic bowls they cannot tip.
- **Vitamin C supplementation** should be considered for any guinea pig that is growing, pregnant or showing signs of disease. It is essential if lower quality food is being fed, or if the food has been stored a long time. Oxbow vitamin C supplements are the ideal treat for this.

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Health

- **Teeth grow continuously** throughout life. They need plenty of fibre, meaning hay, to wear them down to a healthy length.
- **Scurvy.** A guinea pig that does not get enough vitamin C will develop it, and it is a painful, debilitating disease. This is the one that separates cavies from every other small pet.
- **Obesity** is usually the unintended result of too many pellets and treats. Spot it early, adjust feeding and exercise, and do regular weigh-ins with your exotic vet. It leads on to problems such as bumblefoot.
- **Check the feet regularly** for redness, swelling or wounds.

Call Your Vet Straight Away

- **Gut stasis.** Any decrease or stop in appetite and in droppings. A guinea pig should never stop eating. This is an emergency and turns life-threatening quickly, so see a vet as soon as you can. Keep something at home that can be syringe-fed to buy time on the way, such as Oxbow Critical Care. Gas building up in the intestines can follow, and that becomes dangerous fast.
- Scratching, or any sign of hair loss.
- Redness, swelling or wounds on the feet.
- Signs your cavy may be short of vitamin C.

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

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.