

# Guinea Pig

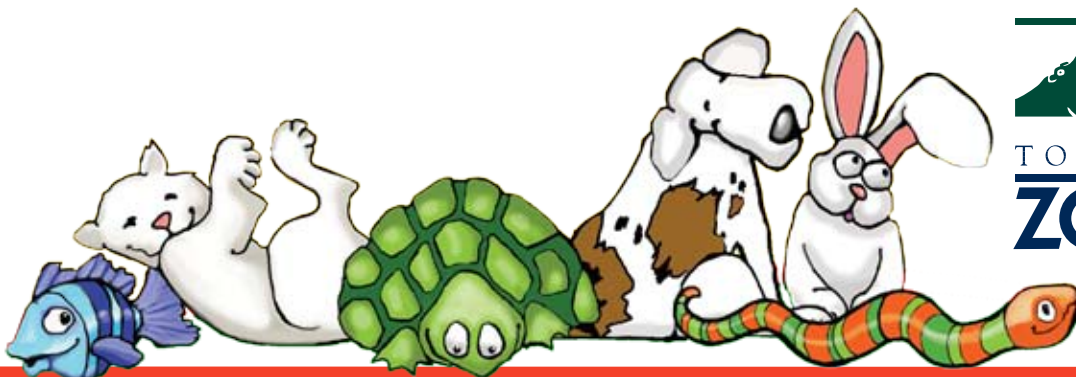
(*cavia porcellus*)



Before deciding if a guinea pig is the right animal for you ask yourself the following questions.

- Have you researched this animal?
- Do you have the time, money and knowledge to provide proper care for the animal's entire lifespan?
- Do you have the appropriate location and space for this animal?
- Is this animal legal to keep as a pet in your area?
- Is there a mature person in the household to provide primary care of the animal?
- Do you have a vet in your area that is able to provide appropriate medical care to this specific animal?

If you have answered yes to these questions or need some extra help, then let The Toledo Zoo give you some great information on your animal of choice. Although this animal may be right for you, please read below and discover some of the important needs of this animal.



# Guinea Pig

(*cavia porcellus*)



## Basics

### Short, tall or grande?

Guinea pigs are not pigs at all! These small animals are more closely related to mice, squirrels and other rodents. Unlike cats and dogs that come in all shapes and sizes, guinea pigs are all about 8 to 12 inches long and have a rounded body (never bony) and a short, rounded neck. Their bright, shiny eyes are on the side of their heads and see motion very well. Males may be bigger than the females, but your guinea pig should be about 2 to 3 lbs. when it is full grown.

Guinea pigs have 20 teeth which keep growing throughout their life. They use their teeth for chewing hard plants and rarely bite people. Healthy guinea pigs have clean teeth that are not too long.

Look at those feet! With four toes on the front and only three on hind legs, these short legged animals don't jump or climb. However, tiny claws on each foot are perfect for digging around, but make sure your guinea pig's nails are not too long and never curl back towards the foot.

Red, black, white, brown and gray; your guinea pig could have one or many colors and its hair could be short or rather long. A guinea pig's coat is the thing that makes each one's appearance unique. Look for a clean, shiny coat with no missing fur.

### How long is that in guinea pig years???

A guinea pig can live 4 to 8 years and the longest living guinea pig lived to be nearly 15 years old! Think about your future, and decide where you could be in 8 years. If you can see yourself happily caring for a cute little guinea pig, then this could be a pet for you.

### Personalities are not just for people.

Every guinea pig has a unique "personality" or individuality, but you can expect most guinea pigs to have some behavior in common. Since guinea pigs are prey animals (food to meat eating animals), your guinea pig may be pretty shy at first. While you may want to play, your new pet could stay away. Don't chase your guinea pig, but slowly let it learn you are safe and that you bring treats and food. Choosing a lively pet that isn't too nervous around people makes a good start, but don't worry if your pig takes some time to get to know you.

Huh, did that guinea pig just say something?! Chirps, purrs, squeaks and rumbles are all part of guinea pig language. They use this to communicate to you and other guinea pigs. These sounds can mean anything from "hey I'm scared" to "this is fun," so listen up and try to figure out your pig's code. Sometimes a guinea pig may even pop straight up into the air to show excitement! Many books and websites can help you learn to "speak" guinea pig.

Just like people, guinea pigs love to spend time with friends. As a social animal, it is often best to have a couple of guinea pigs that can spend time with each other, but be sure they are the same sex (two females are best) or you could end up with lots and lots of new pets—a herd!



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## What do I need to survive?

### Stop... Dinner time!

Everything needs energy to live and guinea pigs have special needs for food.

Let's begin with the most important piece in both our diet and a guinea pig's diet: water! Fresh clean water in a pet bottle with a metal drinking tube is important, and bowls of water often get dirty too quickly. Change the water every day and attach the bottle to the side of your cage to keep a healthy guinea pig.

Next, it's time to buy food, since only you can provide it for your pet. Guinea pigs are plant eaters, also known as herbivores, and never eat meat in their lives. The start of a guinea pig's diet is a guinea pig pellet that can be found at the pet store. While this is very important, adding fruit, vegetables and hay is important, too. (Especially fruits with lots of vitamin C.) Adding slices of orange to your pet's diet will keep it happy and healthy. Make sure to wash these plants before feeding them to your pet. Timothy hay will keep your guinea pig chewing for hours. This lets them keep healthy teeth and give them something to do. Add a handful of hay every day.

Adding enough food so a guinea pig can eat its fill is good, and with regular exercise and space, they will stay healthy. At the Zoo, our guinea pigs get about  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of pellet food each day. Other items, like chew blocks, can be purchased to help keep teeth clean and shortened. A ceramic or stone bowl is best to prevent bowl chewing and regular feeding and treats will help your guinea pig learn that you are a good friend. This will help build a bond between you and your pet.

Here at The Toledo Zoo we feed our animals pellet food, orange slices and apple with a handful of timothy hay every day. Small pieces of kale and broccoli are also given on occasion throughout the week as treats. Sometimes they get other types of fruits and veggies as enrichment or treats.

Stay away from these foods!

- Anything with milk
- Seeds or nuts, which could cause choking
- Candy/people treats
- Meat
- Plants from outside, which could have poisonous sprays on them
- Treats made for other animals like dogs or cats

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## A healthy pet is a happy pet.

Just like us, our pets can get sick and need to go to the doctor. Before bringing any pet home it is best to make a couple of phone calls to veterinarians. It is good to be sure there is someone in your area that could care for a guinea pig if sickness or injury happens.

Here is a list of signs your guinea pig could be sick:

- Runny nose
- Cloudy eyes or milky eyes
- Difficulty breathing or wheezing
- Bald, scaly, sore looking skin including on the bottom of the feet
- Loss of appetite or energy

Remember, a good veterinarian will be happy to talk about your animal's health, so don't hesitate to call if something seems wrong.

## Beauty School

While a guinea pig will never need to go shopping for new clothes or shoes, there are a couple of things that will keep them looking good and feeling great! Especially important with long haired guinea pigs, brushing their fur will keep it clean and untangled. Start slow and easy with brushing until your pet gets comfortable and starts to enjoy the extra care.

Also, sometimes their toenails can get too long and a little trim can do wonders for your guinea pig. Small animal nail trimmers can be found at pet stores, but be careful! Inside their toenails is something called a quick (a small blood vessel). When trimming the nail, don't cut too far back or the quick will bleed and could cause pain or lead to infection. Many times the blood vessel is slightly visible in clear nails, but otherwise taking the tip off and staying away from the toe and fur is best practice. A vet may be able to do this for you or teach you how to trim your animals in the future.

## Could I have some space please?

What does a guinea pig live in? Most often pet guinea pigs will live indoors year round and require an enclosed space to call home. For two guinea pigs, an enclosure or cage measuring about 24 x 48 inches will be satisfactory, but a little extra space will allow a more diverse space to live and play. Cages made of a plastic base and wire siding will be suitable, but stay away from wire floored cages as these can cause foot problems. Place this cage in a space that has consistent temperatures in the range of 60-80° F (average indoor temperatures). Cold weather or hot sun could harm your pet guinea pig, so check the cage area for cold drafts, hot sunshine from windows, etc. Guinea pigs, like us, can suffer from heat exhaustion or frostbite, but a calm indoor space away from doors and windows will work well.

Now let's decorate! First, add some bedding or floor covering. Use old newspaper on the floor, and then add hiding areas and bedding to make it comfortable and safe feeling for your animal. Shredded newspaper, old cereal boxes, corn cob bedding, hay or store-bought hide boxes work great. Make sure to remove stickers, plastic or tape from anything in the cage as it could make your guinea pig sick.

Now add the water bottle, ceramic food dish and some hay. Looking ready? Just take one more look for anything dangerous like sharp cage edges or dangling power cords, and you should have a very nice home for any guinea pig.

Clean up time! Now that you have a living, eating, pooping guinea pig, it's time to clean up. Every day you should remove any wet bedding, bits of old food, and any other mess your guinea pigs has made. Once a week or so, strip everything out of its cage and wash and dry your guinea pig's cage. Replace clean hide areas and bedding. This not only keeps your animal healthy, but saves you from a smelly house.



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## How am i going to affect you?

### How much is that piggy in the window? Squeak! Squeak!

There are many places you can purchase a guinea pig, but some are better than others. Some animal rescues and shelters have guinea pigs ready for adoption. Looking at these options can give a homeless guinea pig a new family. Some pet stores sell guinea pigs too, but make sure they practice good animal care. Check for signs of good health, and stay away from places that don't care for their animals.

From all of the information above, you can see it takes a lot of stuff to prepare for a guinea pig. The animal only costs about \$10-35, but the cage, bedding, food and other supplies can cost \$100 or more. It is good to look at your local pet stores and online to price everything you'll need for pet care before you bring home your pet.

What about vet visits? If sickness or injury occurs with your new family member, then vet bills could be very pricey.

### Risks and benefits to owning your animal.

#### Risks:

Guinea pigs are good beginning pets and there are not many risks to you as the keeper. However, anything with a mouth can bite. It is very rare for a guinea pig to bite, but if nipping occurs it is a usually sign of stress or sickness. If your animal is stressed, it may also kick, squirm or wiggle. Returning your animal to its "safe space" or cage will let the animal relax and become calm in the case of biting, kicking or squirming.

If you have other animals in the house, remember that guinea pigs may not be comfortable interacting with your other pets. Cats and dogs could be conceived as a danger and stress out your new friend. Please be sure you consider everyone in the household before adding a new family member.

#### Benefits:

Guinea pigs are cute, talkative, fun little animals that allow people to care for and learn about nature and responsible animal care. Also, countless studies have shown that pet ownership lowers anxiety and stress levels and can even lower blood pressure! Their companionship in exchange for your care can teach wonderful lessons and enrich life. Some people even believe pets can lead to longer life!

### Laws... Who let the dogs out?

While many animals are protected against cruelty by law, there are not specific laws that single out guinea pig owners. If you provide proper care for your animal, then you are able to keep this species of rodent.

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## Our "together" time

### Time flies when you are having fun with your new pet!

Interacting with your pet is an important and fun thing to do, so let's talk about proper holding and interaction. Most importantly a calm guinea pig is a happy guinea pig, and a happy guinea pig will be a wonderful pet.

To hold a guinea pig always use two hands, slow easy movements and gentle touches to keep your animal secure and comfortable. It is best to sit or kneel close to them and then, using two hands, "scoop" underneath the animal to support its legs. Moving down to its level will be comforting to your pet and will also prevent a long, dangerous fall if the animal leaves your hands.

If you don't chase your pet and calmly offer rewards (like a favorite treat), then your guinea pig will become excited to see you. Building a friendship with your animal may take a little time, so take a moment everyday to remind your pet that you are a good person to be around.

### Guinea Pig boot camp and training with treats.

Training and treats are great tools for any pet owner. First, determine a reward or treat that really makes your pet interested and motivated. The more it wants your reward the more your pet will do to get it.

Here are some possible guinea pig rewards:

- Small amounts of strawberries, oranges, and other sweet fruit
- Small amounts of lettuce, bell pepper, kale and even cilantro

Small amounts of treats can go a long way, so only use the smallest amount that will still motivate your animal. Now that we have some treats, you can start training. The best way to train is with baby steps. Think of what you want your pet to do and then make a plan to get your animal there. Rewarding with a treat when your pet makes steps in the right direction will keep the animal moving in that direction.

Guinea pigs are not likely to learn complicated behavior, but training simple behaviors like "come" should be possible with practice. Positive reinforcement for the right behavior is the best way to go. Look for training resources online and at your local library.

### Keep 'em busy (and out of trouble)!

What does your animal do when you are not around? It will get into anything it can find and sometimes cause trouble. Just like people get bored, animals can get bored without something to do. Giving your animal fun things to do is an important job for pet owners. Since animals can't go out and buy new toys, they will often use whatever is around. This could mean chewing the wrong things, trying to get out of their housing to explore or worse. Giving animals enriching times or "enrichment" will keep them busy and happy.

Here are some great guinea pig enrichment ideas:

- Give them paper tubes, cardboard boxes, shredded news paper
- Hide food
- Train your guinea pig
- Have other guinea pigs for company
- Let them walk around a safe place in your home (always under supervision!)
- Let them walk around in an exercise ball

Change up the enrichment regularly to keep your pet's home new and exciting!



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Excellent! You have read over the basics of guinea pig pet ownership and care.

If you have determined that this type of pet is not the one for you, you may wish to consider volunteering at The Toledo Zoo, your local humane society/animal shelter, vet, animal rehabilitation facility or other animal caretaking establishment in order to interact with animals and learn more about which ones could make a good pet for you.

## Learn More About Guinea Pigs

At your local library:

Guinea Pigs, by Jinny Johnson

- A fully illustrated kids' book about guinea pig care

Guinea Pigs, by Laura Howell

- A fully illustrated kids' book about guinea pig care

On the web:

<http://www.guinealynx.info/>

- Health and care for guinea pigs

<http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/index.html>

- Excellent source of animal information of all kinds

