

## Guinea Pigs as Pets

**History and Biology:** Guinea pigs (cavies) make enjoyable pets. They have lively personalities with a gentle disposition. Our pet guinea pigs come from a species of wild cavy found in Central and South America, which subsists mostly on grass and other vegetation. Domestic cavies are still raised by the people of the Altiplano and are often left uncaged to forage around the dwellings.

Guinea pigs are rodents with compact stocky bodies and short limbs. They lack a tail and come in a variety of breeds with varying hair types, though some lack hair altogether. Males are generally larger than females. With good care, guinea pigs can live anywhere from 4-8 years in captivity.

### Anatomy and Physiology:

- Like rabbits, guinea pigs have a cecum, which is a large, thin-walled organ connected to the small intestine and colon. The cecum houses bacteria and protozoa that help digest food material. In a healthy guinea pig, food may take 20 hours to pass through the digestive tract.
- All of a guinea pig's teeth grow continuously. The main way the teeth are kept at their proper length, is through feeding hay, which forces the cheek teeth to grind/occlude against each other. Wood chews are not safe and should not be used.

### Housing:

- Cage size should be spacious as healthy guinea pigs will produce a large amount of feces and urine. Additionally, a larger cage will promote exercise and enrichment.
- The cage should have a solid bottom cage and appropriate bedding should be used to help soak up urine and feces. Avoid pine, cedar or any clay-based bedding or litter. Hard wood shavings or paper are appropriate. Whatever is selected, be sure the bedding is as dust free as possible.
- Glass or plexi-glass aquariums are not suitable as they do not allow for enough ventilation.
- Cages should be changed frequently to prevent the build-up of ammonia.

### Diet:

- Clean, fresh water should always be available. Using a water bottle with a ball-valve is recommended. The bottles should be cleaned regularly. Brushes are available at most pet stores to clean water bottles.

- A high-quality guinea pig pellet should be fed. Seed mixes are not appropriate, and may cause gastrointestinal upset, obesity and other disease. A high quality grass hay should be available at all times. Leafy greens can account for up to 20 percent of the diet.
- If on a well-balanced diet, guinea pigs do not need supplements or salt licks, other than vitamin C. These may cause an imbalance of certain minerals and nutrients which may lead to health problems.
- Guinea pigs require supplemental vitamin C as they lack a special enzyme to convert vitamin C from glucose. Healthy guinea pigs require 10 mg per day; however, sick, pregnant or lactating guinea pigs may require much higher levels. A good commercial product called “Daily C” is made by Oxbow.
- Because of their unique gastrointestinal anatomy, guinea pigs are very sensitive to foods high in sugar. Fruit is not appropriate. High sugar vegetables, such as baby carrots, bell pepper, tomatoes and corn should also be avoided. Yogurt drops and seed treats are not appropriate. **If a guinea pig stops eating, even if it is only for 24 hours, this is a medical emergency, and he/she should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.**

#### Socialization and Behavior:

- Guinea pigs are social animals who enjoy the company of others. If possible, they should be housed with others.
- Though guinea pigs have small vocal folds, they are able to vocalize and make a wide range of calls. These can include whistles, purrs, chirps, grunts and chutters.
- In guinea pig groups, hair pulling is a sign of aggression. Over grooming or hair chewing and/or ear biting a subordinate can be a sign of overcrowding or stressful conditions.

#### Veterinary Care:

- Finding a good veterinarian is recommended. Guinea pigs should have routine physical exams every 6 months. Manifestation of a health condition is often rapid due to their fast metabolic rates, so early detection is important. Ideally, your guinea pig should have an exam after purchase or adoption, and every 6 months after his or her first exam.