Guinea Pig

*Cavia porcellus*

Fact Sheet

**Status:** Common

**Distribution:** Worldwide in captivity, non-existent in the wild

**Habitat:** Usually cages or aquariums with wood shavings lining the bottom. In South America, the country in which they originated, they are kept in specialized hunts or simply allowed to run free.

**Diet:** They eat fruits and vegetables in addition to commercial pellets. They prefer green leafy vegetables such as carrot tops and lettuce.

**Length:** 200 to 500 mm

**Weight:** 25 to 35 ounces

**Reproduction:** The female guinea pig can produce up to 5 litters in one year; however, spring marks the peak of the breeding season. These animals reach maturity quickly; females are sexually mature at two months of age while males reach maturity at three months. Male guinea pigs will fight to determine who gets to guard, and mate with, a female in breeding condition. After 68 days, the female gives birth to 1 to 13 young, with 4 being the most typical litter size. Young guinea pigs are born very highly developed, with eyes open and covered with fur. They can even survive after just five days of drinking their mother’s milk.

**Longevity:** 4 to 7 years

**General Description:** These small mammals come in a wide variety of colors and have differing coat lengths depending on the specific breed. Some common colors are: white, black, red, cream, lilac, and brown. Any combination of these colors is also possible. Surprisingly, these animals have no external tail. They have four digits on the front feet and only three digits on their back feet, all of which are equipped with sharp claws.

**Behavior:** These social animals often form groups of 5 to 10 animals. They communicate using squeaks to express excitement and chirps to indicate distress. Tooth chattering is often used to indicate aggression or submission.

**Did you know?** The fur of some guinea pig breeds can grow as fast as an inch per month! Interestingly, these animals were originally raised as a food source by the people of South America.
Where can you find them? In zoos, pet stores, and homes across the world.

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Distribution, Habitat, Diet, Length, Reproduction, General Description, Behavior, Did you know?, and Where can you find them? information from: http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Cavia_porcellus.html


Caring for Guinea Pigs (Cavia porcellus)
Guinea pigs have four digits on the foreleg and three digits on the hindleg, and have a vestigial tail. There are three hair coat varieties: English shorthair, Peruvian long straight hair, and Abyssinian whorled hair. There is a wide range of colors, including white, brown, black, red and various mixed colors. The young are born precocious, which means they are born fully mobile with hair, erupted teeth, and open eyes and ears. They start eating solid food at only a few days of age, but should be allowed to nurse until weaned by the mother.

I. Biological Information
Life span: 4–7 years
Adult body **weight**: 700–1000 g (25–35 oz); females are slightly smaller than males
Sexual maturity: females, 2–3 months; males, 3–4 months
Estrous cycle: 16 days
Gestation: 68 days (varies with size of litter, range 59–72 days); pups born with eyes and ears opened and fully furred.
Litter size: 2–5
Weaning age: 14–28 days
Adult daily food intake: 35 g (1.3 oz)

II. Housing Requirements
Guinea pigs need substantial floor space to exercise. They do not jump or readily climb, so the height of the cage is less important. Guinea pigs should not be housed on wire grid floors because they are prone to developing sores on the feet. Because guinea pigs play with their water and urinate copiously, the use of bedding is highly recommended. Bedding material may include hardwood chips, wood shavings, paper products or cleaned hay. Do not use cedar chips because wood bedding with a high content of resins, such as pine or cedar, may cause toxicity in the young if this material is eaten. Depending upon the size of
the cage and the type of bedding, the cage should be cleaned once or twice a week. It should never be allowed to remain moist, because they can lead to foot inflammation and infections. Solid bottom cages and wire floors may also cause trauma to the feet. Cages should be washed with detergent and water. They should be thoroughly rinsed and dried before replacing bedding. Room temperature should be in the range of 63–79°F (17–26°C) with 30–70% humidity.

III. Feeding
In the wild guinea pigs are strict herbivores, grazing on a wide variety of plants. In captivity their nutritional needs are best met by providing them with commercially available guinea pig pelleted feed. They require a high level of vitamin C in the ration; thus, generic rodent foods may result in a clinical deficiency called scurvy. Because vitamin C and other nutrients deteriorate rapidly, the feed should be stored in a cool, dark place for a maximum of 90 days. Scurvy occurs within a few weeks of inadequate levels of vitamin C and may present a wide variety of clinical signs. Symptoms may include oral bleeding, swollen joints, infections, pneumonia, and/or diarrhea. Guinea pigs have a tendency to overeat, which causes obesity and urinary tract problems. A veterinarian can advise you on the proper amount to provide daily. Grass hay pellets (not straw or alfalfa) should be available to the animal (1/4 cup of pellets per 5 lbs of animal weight). Sunflower seeds should only be used as occasional treats; they are too high in fats and have little nutritional value. Fruits and vegetables may be provided as a source of vitamin C and as treats. These foods should be rinsed well to prevent infection with Salmonella, to which guinea pigs are particularly susceptible. Vitamin C supplements may also be put in the water.

Caring for Animals: Nov. 2004. Prepared by AALAS’ Scientific Advisory Committee

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Guinea pigs drink a large quantity of water and also tend to play with their water bottles. Consequently, water should be provided in large-sized bottles with sipper tubes and the bottles should be securely attached to the side of the cage. Because guinea pigs may play with their sipper tubes and flood their cage, it is preferable to position a sipper tube outside of the cage so the animals can drink through a small opening in the cage wall. Guinea pigs may also plug
the sipper tubes with chewed food retained in the mouth. Water bottles and sipper tubes should be cleaned thoroughly whenever the water is changed (at least once a week).

IV. Handling
Guinea pigs are gentle animals and seldom bite. They tend to run when frightened. They can be picked up by a gentle grasp around the chest while supporting the rear legs with the other hand.

V. Diseases
Guinea pigs are susceptible to a wide range of bacterial, viral, fungal and parasitic diseases. Most of these diseases are treatable but expensive. Before making the decision to acquire a guinea pig, consider whether or not you are willing to meet these potential expenses. Sick guinea pigs tend to become less active, with ruffled hair coats and decreased consumption of food or water. If changes in bowel movements, urination, hair loss, discharges or swellings are noted, a veterinarian should be consulted. A wide variety of antibiotics cause toxicity in guinea pigs, so caution should be taken when selecting them for treatment. Respiratory infections, including pneumonia, are some of the most common diseases. Some of the infectious agents may also cause swelling of the lymph nodes and abscesses. Diarrhea may be caused by infectious agents, parasites or protozoa. Hair loss can be due to ringworm or parasitic lice or mites, as well as behavioral chewing or barbering of hair by cagemates. They are also susceptible to the development of bladder stones and bladder infections.

Pregnant females may develop toxemia of pregnancy, which is an emergency situation. In late pregnancy or after giving birth (parturition), affected females become depressed, anorexic and generally have an unthrifty appearance. Death occurs rapidly if untreated. Some infectious diseases of guinea pigs, such as Salmonellosis or ringworm, may be contagious to humans. People may also develop allergies to them. If a human disease is suspected due to contact with guinea pigs, the advice of a physician should be sought.

—Resources on the Web—
1. Bramcote Animal Rescue, offering varied information from vital statistics to ailments.
   http://www.coldal.org/cavie.htm
2. Guinea Pigs World, offering short informative pages on guinea pigs origins and history, and what their different grunts, squeaks and body language may mean. http://www.pimms-pages.co.uk/
3. Minnesota AALAS, offering a comprehensive information site on all aspects of guinea pig care.
   http://www.ahc.umn.edu/rar/MNAALAS/GPig.html

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