



GUINEA PIGS (CAVIES)

For many people, Guinea Pigs were their very first pet. This is for good reasons as they are a naturally clean and easy animal to handle and also fairly hardy considering their relatively small size. However, if all members of your household are out working or at school all day, you should consider two Guinea Pigs rather than one as they are very social animals and should always be able to socially interact. Two males are more likely to fight but generally when they are in the presence of females - in season. "Colonies" in special breeding programs generally involve numerous females housed with only one male. Be aware that females and males are both capable of territorial aggression.

If you do not wish to breed Guinea Pigs then make sure that your new purchase(s) have been in holding cages with the sexes separated. This is because Guinea Pigs can mate at the very young age of 4+ weeks and there is no "safe age" to house males and females together without the potential of a pregnancy. If you are buying a mature or semi-mature female from a pet shop, there is always a chance it could be pregnant. This is because Guinea Pigs have quite a long gestation period for their size (nine weeks) and pet shop staff and owners can only take the word of the breeder that males and females have been housed separately. Lifespan - 6 to 8 years

WILD GUINEA PIGS: The ancestors of your new pet Guinea Pig are thought to have been brought into Europe by the Spanish during the sixteenth century from South America. The name "Cavy" comes from their scientific name *Cavia porcellus*. They not related to pigs and are in fact a rodent and more closely related to porcupines even though the males are boars and the females are called sows. They are an unusual rodent because they don't have a long tail and their babies are born fully developed with hair and their eyes open. They will move around their home the day they are born and will eat solid food within a couple of days.

HOUSING: Guinea Pigs can be kept inside or outside but if they are to be housed in the garden, special consideration must be given to protection from draughts, rain and other extremes in the weather and from stray cats and dogs. If permitted to run freely inside, be very aware that the chewing of electrical cables is fatal. There are numerous different types of hutches available from your PIAA pet shop, some of which will suit your needs and others may need to be adapted to provide extra protection in your particular circumstances. Take the free advice that will be offered to you in regard to housing and make sure the shop owner or breeder knows where you will be placing the hutch. Nesting hay is a requirement for all hutches regardless of their design and size. You may also have an open pen that can be placed in the garden for exercise but this must be attended at all times as the Guinea Pig(s) are exposed to predators.

TRANSPORT: Your new Guinea Pig will probably be handed to you in a small 'pet box'. This is the best method of transportation, and ensures that your new pet will remain safe and protected until you are ready to install him in his new home. It is not advisable to attempt to transport any small animals in uncovered open cages. The security and darkness of an enclosed box (with holes punched in it) will avoid stressing the animal during transit. Guinea Pigs suffer from heat stress and should not be exposed to long, hot journeys with stops on the way home.

It is critical that you take your new Guinea Pig home without delay, thus avoiding heat & stress.

SETTING-UP AT HOME: Adopt the following procedure when letting your new pet out of the transport box and into his hutch. Firstly, site the hutch in a shaded place that has a relatively constant temperature and away from draughts. It should be placed in a position where it cannot be interfered with by small children and/or other pets. The hutch should be set up complete with filled food containers and water bowl or tube drinker. The nesting hay referred to above should now be placed in the enclosed nesting area so that there is somewhere to hide. Let the Guinea Pig come out of the transport box and enter quietly into his new home. At first he may be a bit bewildered, and perhaps the unfamiliar surroundings of the new home will cause him to hide in the nesting area. Over-excited children can stress a new pet so if children are present, be very conscious of their behaviour at this time. Your new pet should be left to settle down on the first day and as he regains his confidence he will start to explore his new home.

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HUTCH CLEANING: Whilst Guinea Pigs are clean little fellows to handle, they can be very messy around their hutch. So, the daily changes of water and food should also involve the removal of anything that is likely to cause health problems due to a lack of hygiene. This includes wet hay, droppings and any of the previous day's fruit and vegetables as once this starts to decay, it will be rejected. If this procedure is followed daily, a full cleanout at the weekend is all that is generally needed and it does not become a "chore". Dirty areas should be washed with hot water and detergent or with a mild disinfectant such as a 4% washing soda solution. Rinse all washed areas and dry afterwards because residual detergents and disinfectants can be very harmful. If you have an exercise pen to put your Guinea Pig into for an hour or so, you should stand the cleaned hutch in full direct sunlight as this is a natural sterilizing process that is effective and free! (Don't put your Guinea Pig straight back into a hot hutch). Thoroughly wash and rinse the drinking bottle and food bowls. It is very important that everyone that cleans the hutch - including the children, can recognise mouldy hay. New hay going into the hutch should be fresh and free of any mould.

FEEDING: Guinea Pigs are herbivores and if introduced to a wide variety of grass, fresh fruit and veggies when they are young, they will not become fussy eaters and be healthier for it. Feed lettuce cautiously as it can cause diarrhoea. They should have constant access to a quality "Guinea Pig Mix" (a pelletised ration) - Vetafarm guinea pig pellets are recommended as they contain vitamin C sealed into the manufacturing process. Alternatively use another guinea pig mix and supplement with vitamin C tablets in their water.

IMPORTANT: Guinea Pigs must have vitamin C in their diet, either supplement in the water or ensure the diet includes it every day. All fresh vegetable matter must be thoroughly washed as it is possible for residual pesticides to be on produce and if eaten, it is likely to cause serious problems or a fatality. Lucerne is a good source of vitamin C and it is available as hay or chaff and some Guinea Pig mixes do contain Lucerne chaff. While also high in calcium, a smaller amount of lucerne is suggested for guinea pigs over 1 year old, combined with a meadow hay.

Do not feed Guinea Pigs - Beetroot, Potatoes or peelings, Rhubarb, Bread or any baked product or Oxalis weed as they are all toxic.

TAMING: To hand tame a pet Guinea Pig is very easy. They very rarely bite or scratch and they generally tame-up without any special skills being applied. If young children are involved, until your Guinea Pig is tamed, it should only be allowed to be handled by one child at a time. If more than one child is present during the initial handling stages, the animal may become stressed due to over-enthusiastic young hands. Once explained, children understand this and a handling routine is established. If this policy is adopted, taming will be a very quick and easy process. It is simply a question of handling the Guinea Pig in such a way that it feels secure (close in to the chest), best done whilst sitting down and not handled for extensive periods of time. In other words, handle your pet gently, securely and for short periods but often. If it is telling you "I don't want to be handled this way" by struggling, either change the way it is being held or release it completely and give it some time before repeating the process. Within a few days it will be happy to be held and come to you for a fresh vegetable food reward.

HEALTH: This PIAA basic care sheet cannot give you detailed information on diseases and health issues that relate to Guinea Pigs. If your Guinea Pig does become sick, you need expert advice and you need it immediately you discover that there is a problem. Guinea Pigs are usually trouble-free and hardy; they should appear bright-eyed and have a shiny appearance. Many of the commonly encountered problems are the result of not providing the balanced diet including vitamin C referred to above or failing to maintain a clean and healthy environment also referred to above. A lack of vitamin C can lead to a disease called scurvy. This is not harmful to humans, but can kill your pig.

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