

# CARING FOR YOUR GUINEA PIG

A guide to proper care for educated owners and happy pets



*This guide has been compiled with information from a number of experts and trusted sources.*

# INTRODUCTION



Congratulations on adopting your new guinea pig! We're so happy that you've decided to open your heart and your home to an animal in need of love. A guinea pig can be one of the most endearing and wonderful pets. They may live as long as 9 years (the average is 5 to 7), so the decision to bring one into your home must be made carefully. Your piggy will depend on you for food, water, medical care, and companionship.

Unfortunately, many owners are misinformed or not informed at all about proper care and often guinea pigs are unintentionally neglected or abandoned after suffering so long from an ailment that could have been easily prevented and even treated. **Guinea pigs are NOT a starter pet** and they do require your time and energy. With this guide, you will learn all about what your adorable new furry friend needs to thrive. With a little love and dedication, you will form a wonderful bond with your guinea pig, who may just reward you with ever-amusing "zoomies" and "popcorns" and even licks!

## HELPFUL TERMS

sow - Female guinea pig

boar - Male guinea pig

cavy - Another name for "guinea pig"

popcorns - Jumps in the air guinea pigs do when they're happy; often accompanied by "zoomies"

## DID YOU KNOW?

There are over 13 types of guinea pigs. Skinny pigs (some say they look like tiny hippos) have no hair, but they require a lot of extra care to keep warm and healthy. Long-haired breeds, like the Peruvian and the Sheltie, require daily grooming.

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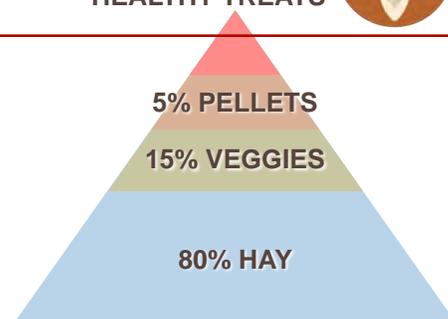
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**FUN FACT**  
In Switzerland, it is illegal to sell a single guinea pig to someone who doesn't already have one. That's because they are pack animals and get lonely. Your piggy should always have a piggy friend—other animals and you don't count (sorry!)

**BIGGER IS BETTER!**  
Guinea pigs need at least 8-10 feet of space (and they should never be kept outside)! The more pigs you have, the more space they'll need. This helps keep everyone happy and getting along, and provides room for "zoomies."



Guinea pigs are strict herbivores (vegetarians) and proper nutrition is essential to their health. Your guinea pig's diet should consist of quality hay and pellets, a variety of fresh vegetables, and fresh water. **A guinea pig's body cannot make its own Vitamin C, so you will need to provide your pet with a daily Vitamin C supplement.**



## Hay



Guinea pigs must have **unlimited access** to quality hay. This provides the necessary fiber required by their digestive system, and helps to keep their teeth (which never stop growing) at a healthy length. Guinea pigs under 6 months of age and pregnant or nursing sows (females) should be fed Alfalfa hay, which is higher in protein, calcium, and carbohydrates. After 6 months of age, guinea pigs should be transitioned away from Alfalfa and instead receive a grass hay like Timothy (most common), Orchard, Oat, or Meadow. A good hay is free of weeds, dirt, or other foreign material; it smells clean not moldy or musty; and it will have a nice and natural green color.

## Pellets



Pellets are a great addition to your guinea pigs' diet, but it is not necessary to provide an unlimited supply. Some guinea pigs will eat more pellets than others, and while pellets are a healthy and important part of a guinea pig's diet, too many pellets can contribute to obesity. As with hay, young guinea pigs under 6 months of age and pregnant or nursing sows (females) should be fed Alfalfa pellets, which is higher in protein, calcium, and carbohydrates. After 6 months of age, guinea pigs should be transitioned away from Alfalfa and instead be provided with a timothy-based pellet. Be sure to select a pellet specifically formulated with Vitamin C for guinea pigs (not for rabbits).

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**Choose a plain pellet:** avoid mixes with nuts, seeds, dried fruit, and dyed pieces. Seeds in husks can be a choking hazard. Each guinea pig will eat approximately 1/8 cup of pellets a day when also fed adequate hay and fresh vegetables. Purchase pellets in small quantities and store in a dry cool dark place to preserve the potency of the C (look for a pellet with an expiration date to check for freshness).

## Vegetables



Small amounts of fresh vegetables (about 1-2 cups a day) are an important additional source of Vitamin C and other nutrients. Feed primarily green leafy vegetables. Clean, pesticide-free grass, clover, dandelion greens, corn husks and silk, will also be appreciated by your pet. Rinse vegetables thoroughly and feed at room temperature. Do not feed wilted or spoiled food. Vegetables must be introduced slowly to avoid digestive upsets.

Guinea pigs have an advanced sense of taste and many more taste buds than humans, so a good variety of vegetables is the key to maintaining your pigs' health. Each guinea pig also has their own personality and preferences, so don't expect all of your piggies to like the same foods. Calcium is essential, but some guinea pigs are prone to bladder stones and may do better on a diet not too high in calcium. Fruits are also very popular with guinea pigs but contain high amounts of sugar and should be fed in moderation as a treat.

Wash veggies and serve at room temperature. Cold food can cause stomach upset.



**Helpful hint:** For a longer list and more information about ideal fruits and vegetables or those to avoid, consult Guinea Lynx. A calcium to phosphorous Ca:P ratio of 1.3:1 is ideal for guinea pigs.

APPROVED ITEMS	
Red or green leaf lettuce	Dill
Romaine lettuce	Radishes
Cilantro	Spinach*
Tomatoes	Dandelion greens*
Bell pepper (all colors)	Parsley*
Cucumber	Kale*
Carrots & carrot tops	Apples (no seeds)
Celery	Strawberries
Wheatgrass	Raspberries
Radicchio	Watermelon
Watercress	Peaches

*\*feed in moderation, can be high in calcium*

DO NOT FEED	
Iceberg lettuce	Potatoes
Rhubarb	Seeds & nuts
Tomato leaves	Chocolate
Mushrooms	Sultanas
Daisies	Green beans
Buttercups & daffodils	Bread
Dairy products	Peppers (only bell is ok!)

*Don't give too many carrots -- at most, only a small carrot every other day or so. Avoid or severely limit cruciferous vegetables like cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower as they may cause gas.*

## Vitamin C

Guinea pigs cannot manufacture their own Vitamin C and require 25 to 50 mg daily to prevent scurvy. Young, ill, nursing and pregnant animals require extra Vitamin C. While many guinea pigs receive Vitamin C from fresh vegetables and pellets, you should also provide a daily Vitamin C tablet to your guinea pig. **DO NOT add Vitamin C drops to their water.** This makes it difficult to know how much Vitamin C your guinea pig is getting, and because droplets can change the taste of the water, this may lead to your guinea pig drinking less (not good). **Avoid purchasing any multivitamins** as excessive amounts of fat soluble vitamins like A and D can cause serious problems for your pet.

**Helpful hint:** Oxbow makes a great Vitamin C tablet. While some guinea pigs love them, others aren't as excited by them. If you soak the tablet in water until it's soft, that usually helps to make them more appetizing.

## Water

Fresh filtered water, changed daily, (usually provided in a drip bottle to prevent contamination) should always be available. Avoid distilled water. Avoid water high in minerals, especially if high in calcium. Do not put vitamins or medications in the water. **Clean water bottles (including the insides of the spouts) often!**

## Important Tips

- Don't fall for commercial treats marketed for guinea pigs (like yogurt drops) which can even be detrimental to their health. Consuming these empty calories (many contain fat, sugars and even excess calcium) can result in decreased consumption of the basic foods they really need.
- Do not feed mixes or treats with nuts, seeds, dried fruit and dyed pieces.
- Do not use mineral wheels or salt licks.
- Do not feed meat.
- Do not feed rabbit pellets (they do not have Vitamin C and may include antibiotics toxic to guinea pigs).

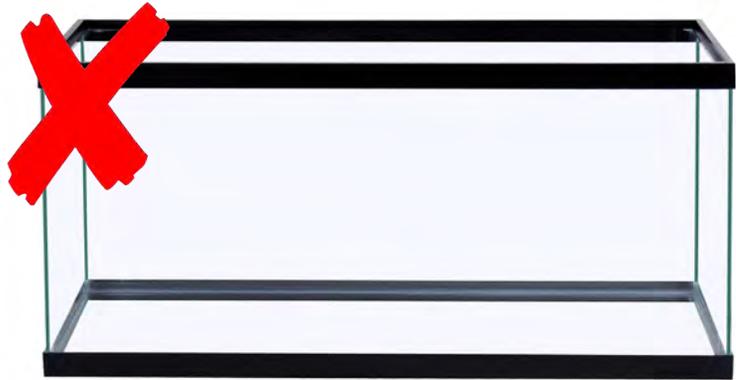
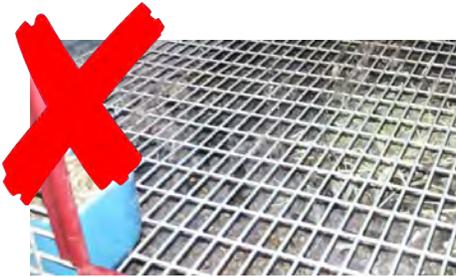


Perhaps one of the most commonly misunderstood areas of guinea pig care is housing. **Guinea pigs need a lot of space**, much more than the pet store will tell you. The right environment goes as long way in ensuring your guinea pig is happy and healthy. With so many ways to be creative here, lots of guinea pig owners come up with fun cage ideas to entertain their piggy and themselves. If you're handy with a sewing machine or like to build things, you really could do lots of cool things for your piggy!

## Environment

**Guinea pigs must be kept indoors.** Supervised outdoor time on grass that has not been treated with any pesticides is ok, but your piggy's home needs to be inside of a building structure. Outdoor hutches are not appropriate. Guinea pigs need a stable temperature so choose a bright draft-free room with a stable temperature range between 65 and 75 degrees F (18 to 24 degrees C), out of direct sunlight, situated close to household activities. The more your guinea pigs are part of your daily lives, the happier you will both be. Guinea pigs are very sensitive to heat stroke and do better in cooler temperatures than in warmer ones.

Select a smooth bottomed cage (no wire bottom, ramps or shelves on which they can catch their feet). Without proper flooring, feet can become swollen and develop painful infections (like bumblefoot) that result in amputations if they reach the bone. This is easily preventable with the proper housing and care. If separation from other household pets is not an issue, an open-topped enclosure may allow you to interact with and pet your guinea pig more easily. **Not Recommended:** Aquariums and plastic tubes are much too small and have poor ventilation. This type of housing isolates your piggy by limiting sight, sound and smell.



**Never house guinea pigs with other species** (rabbits, for example). As a general rule, they should not be allowed to interact with your other pets. Even if a rabbit and guinea pig might get along, a rabbit's hind legs are very powerful and the rabbit can easily accidentally kill the guinea pig by just jumping nearby. Remember that guinea pigs are prey animals so if you have other pets in the house, a sturdy cage top is recommended.

## PLAYING AROUND

Guinea pigs are playful and active creatures, but they **DO NOT** use exercise balls or wheels. These put unhealthy pressure on their spines and should not be provided.



## KEEPING COOL

Guinea pigs are sensitive to heat stroke and do better in cooler temperatures than in warmer ones. Provide a frozen water bottle or ice pack wrapped in a towel for your piggy to lie next to during the hot summer months.



## Space Requirements

Provide as large of a cage as possible. Minimum space required for one piggy is 7 square feet, and 2-4 more square feet for each additional guinea pig. Guinea pigs should not be housed alone unless they absolutely cannot get along with their cage mates. In that instance, you would have separate cages (each 7 square feet or larger) near each other so your guinea pigs can still safely socialize. A larger cage for your piggies will require less frequent cleaning and provide space for play, toys, and exercise. Many pet owners report happily popcorning pigs when introduced to their new, spacious living quarters. And more space makes “getting along” easier for cage mates.

Some owners allow their guinea pigs free run of their entire home or a portion of it. This does require some careful precautions so please do more research before going that route. Remember that guinea pigs are not litter-box-trained and commonly poop or pee wherever they roam.

**Important Note:** Space requirements are for floor/bottom-level space. Guinea pigs are not climbers and a tall cage does not count when calculating the space you’re providing for your piggy to run around.

**You will not find any appropriately-sized cages sold in pet stores.**

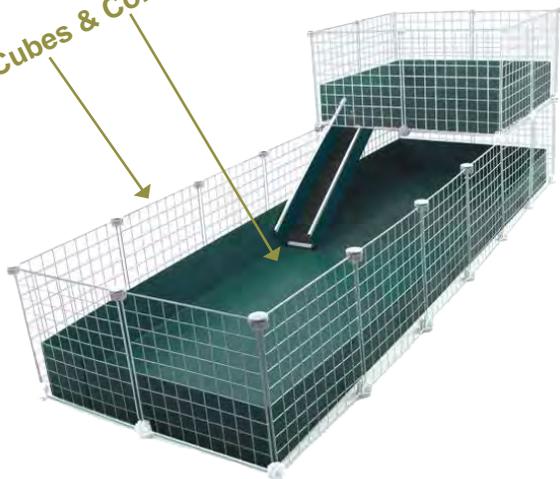
CAGE SIZE <u>MINIMUMS</u>		
# of Piggies	Space	C&C Grids
	7 sq.ft	2x3
	8 sq.ft	2x4
	10 sq.ft	2x5
	12 sq.ft	2x6



**The Midwest Guinea Pig Cage is the minimum space required.**



Cubes & Coroplast



## C&C Cages

An excellent choice for your piggy's home is a C&C cage (so named because it's made from cubes & Coroplast). Many guinea pig owners find these cages to be quite easy to build, and they can be surprisingly inexpensive. These cages allow you to use your imagination to put together an awesome home for your piggy, and to make changes when you need or want to.

### Why Choose a C&C Cage?

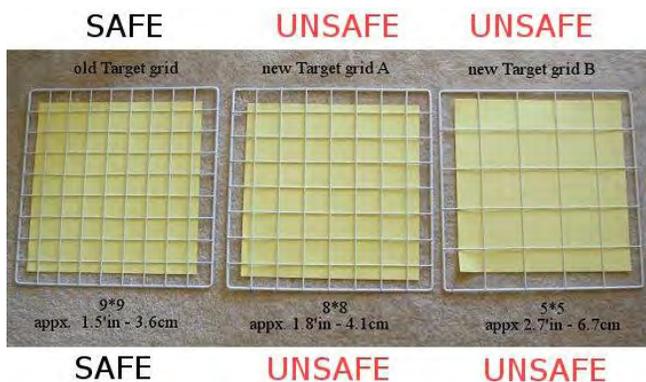
- You can make it any size and shape you want.
- It's easy to make changes later if you come up with more ideas or need to fit it into a different space.
- They're great as split cages if your piggies don't get along, or if one is recovering from surgery or illness.
- You can easily make lofts and patio areas! You don't even need a C&C cage to add a C&C level for even more space.
- By using zip ties, you can attach grids to make a play pen that quickly folds up for easy storage.



### How Can I Make A C&C Cage?

There are lots of tutorials online about how to put one together, and the good news is that they're really not too difficult. You can buy everything you need online, but the shipping of the Coroplast can be expensive (it's very light, but it ships flat). **Luckily, a trip to Home Depot will solve that**—just look for their corrugated plastic sheets. They don't come in all of the same fun colors you can find online, but they are a great way to keep the project affordable.

**Helpful Tip:** Pick up some zip ties while you're there to tighten the connections of the grids. You can also purchase carpet strips and coated galvanized wire to slide into the slots of the Coroplast to make your own custom length, width, and height ramps! Search Amazon for "binding bars" and you'll find what you need to protect the edges of the coroplast from your curious piggy's chewing.



**Important note about grids:** Make sure you're using the ones with 9 squares per row/column. Some shelving unit kits you can buy use similar grids but with bigger squares that are not good for guinea pigs. However, even these smaller "safe" grids can still be dangerous for young guinea pigs. While your pets are young and small, be sure your coroplast walls go higher up all around the cage—12 inches is best, 6 inches is good for adults.



CaliCavyCollective's  
*spring themed*  
**C&C CAGE TOUR**





## Bedding

There are a number of options for bedding, but the ideal is something that will help keep your piggy dry and his cage clean. The most common types of bedding are fleece, paper products, and wood shavings. Whichever bedding you choose, regular (once a week or more) cleaning of the cage is important. Guinea pigs left to walk on dirty floors and bedding can develop potentially life-threatening illnesses like urine scald or bumblefoot. Some owners find that a combination of different bedding types works best for them. For instance, you might use fleece for the entire cage and then add paper bedding to areas your piggies make dirty most.

**Frequent cage cleaning is important for your piggy's health.** Most owners do a big cleaning once-a-week with spot cleans 2-3x per week or as often as daily. Be sure to wipe your cage down with a mixture of warm water and vinegar. **Do not use any chemicals or harsh cleaners.**



### Fleece

If you are handy with a sewing machine, this may be a fun option for you! Plenty of online videos and tutorials will walk you through easily making your own. Fleece liners are a bigger up-front cost than paper or wood shavings, but once you make or purchase them, they are reusable. Liners often consist of two layers of fleece, with two layers of recycled denim (U-haul moving blanket) sewn in between. The fleece helps to wick away moisture from your piggy, while the inner layers help absorb any wetness.

**Cotton is not affective at keeping your piggy dry so you want to avoid using blankets or towels to line your cage floor unless you are prepared to change**

**heavy-use areas daily.** Making fleece liners is something sewing beginners can try (there are a few no-sew tutorials out there too), or you can choose from the many fun options available online!



### Paper Products

Paper bedding is another soft option for your cage. It can be more expensive, but many owners use it in at least a portion of their cage for its convenience. CareFresh is a popular brand but other companies make and sell additional options. White paper bedding makes it easy to spot any blood in urine and to spot-clean the heavy-use areas. **If you choose a paper bedding, be sure to avoid any dyes or fragrances, and any bedding made from recycled materials containing ink.**

For example, CareFresh sells bedding with lavender buds that they say is safe, but some piggies still have a sensitivity to the smell and can develop respiratory infections even in well-ventilated areas. Newspaper is not recommended as the ink can be toxic to guinea pigs as they walk on it and then lick their hands and feet.



### Wood Shavings

Some owners choose wood shavings for their cage. If that is the right fit for you, **make sure you use only Aspen Shavings.** Cedar and Pine can be highly irritating and cause respiratory illness in your guinea pig. **Cedar and Pine bedding or habitat items are not recommended.**



## Accessories



### Hideys

Guinea pigs need a safe place to hide (remember, they are prey animals). A house inside the cage, perhaps with multiple entrances, will provide a sense of protection and a place to sleep. Be aware that pigloos and other plastic housing have reduced air circulation and can quickly reach high temperatures inside. Because guinea pigs are very sensitive to heat, and because they will choose to stay inside a covered place to hide even if it's too hot for them, plastic houses can become dangerous if used during

outdoor playtime. If you decide to make your own wooden hidey, be careful not to use cedar or pine wood, which can cause respiratory problems for your piggie.



### Toys and Chews

Piggies are curious animals, and their teeth never stop growing. Providing some natural toys and chews will keep them entertained and also keep their teeth to a healthy length. Lots of guinea pig owners find that cardboard boxes or toilet paper rolls with hay stuffed into them are a big hit! Your piggie will likely chew on cardboard, so be careful not to offer any pieces with glue or ink on them.



### Fleece Accessories

There are so many fun fleece accessories out there for your piggies! Do a quick online search or try Etsy and you'll find cuddle sacks, cuddle cups, pillows, tunnels, and more. You can even use fleece to create fun Fleece Forest hiding spots in the cage.



### Hay Racks

Hay racks can be very helpful in making sure your piggies have clean hay to eat. Many piggies love to lie in their hay and will use the bathroom in it, so having some kind of holder can be important. However, **some hay racks can be dangerous**, so safety is an important consideration when selecting a hay rack for your guinea pig. Some racks contain openings that may trap your pet's head, causing him to become stuck. Just select a feeding rack that either has very small openings, so your pet can't stick

his head through, or large openings, so his head won't become trapped. There have been a number of injuries, and even fatalities, from the balls that hold hay, so those should be avoided.

### Pellet Bowls

Guinea pigs love to tip and toss their bowls over, so you may find yourself constantly picking pellets up off the floor. A wider and shallow bowl seems to work well because it allows them to easily grab the pellets and can be harder for them to tip. Especially with male piggies or bigger herds of females, it's a good idea to provide more than one bowl or more than one hay rack so that everyone always has a place to eat.

### Litter Pans

While rabbits can be litter-trained, guinea pigs prefer to poop where they please. It is true that you may notice your piggies have a favorite spot to do their business, but it's often easier to use bedding there and do spot cleans than to try to put in a litter pan and expect them to use it. Some people do create a kitchen area with some kind of tray/insert/pan to make the eating section of the cage easier to keep tidy.



Guinea pigs are herd animals by nature. Although they might enjoy the company of their humans, they will thrive and be happiest with a companion of their own kind. Boys do best in pairs, while girls can be in larger herds. A neutered male with 3 females is close how herds naturally form. Your piggie can have a completely different personality when they're alone—many seem to lose their spunk and hardly ever make any sounds. But, give them a buddy and watch them both spring to life! You'll notice how much happier your piggie is with a piggie friend.

**Be careful that your piggies are of the same sex before putting them together!** Too often, piggies have been incorrectly sexed by a pet store (adopt, don't shop!) and owners find themselves with a quickly-growing group that's more than they can handle. Even if your piggie absolutely does not want a cage mate, which does happen sometimes, he or she should still have a buddy in a nearby cage to smell and talk to. Be aware that a nearby cage of girls (which your piggie will surely smell) can be enough to inspire a pair of boys fight.

## Bonding

### Compatibility

It is a common myth that two male guinea pigs will fight. **Compatibility between two guinea pigs is determined by the personalities of the individuals rather than their gender.** Some guinea pigs will fight with any pig you try to pair them with but the vast majority thrive on company and delight in having a cage companion. The easiest match is usually between two babies or between a baby and an adult guinea pig (1.5 years+), but adults can be paired up successfully as well. Some pigs will bond very closely with their buddies, and others will seem to tolerate or ignore each other. Not every bond is strong and obvious, but you will definitely know if your piggies hate each other. It is worth noting that there are cases where a dominant male who didn't seem to get along with a number of other males suddenly finds a buddy he bonds with. If you have a dominant male, don't be so quick to decide he will forever be alone. It just takes the right match.

### Introductions

**Make sure your new piggie has been quarantined for a minimum of 2 weeks so that you can be sure it doesn't have any illnesses before introducing it to your other piggies.** Avoid introducing any piggies who are weak or otherwise vulnerable.

Introductions should be made in an open area, ideally new to both piggies so there is no territorial dispute. Put the pig you've had the longest in first. If you have a particularly dominant piggie, put it in last, after the newer pig. Let the piggies find each other and watch them quietly and closely for at least an hour or two. If they seem to be getting along well, they can be moved to a freshly cleaned cage (the larger, the better, as it will improve the odds of making a successful pairing). Watch them closely for another hour or so to make sure they continue to get along. Don't rush things. The first night is usually the most stressful, and it is normal that the guinea pigs will spend the following weeks working out their dominance, but a good start is a good sign.

If your piggies begin exhibiting any of the danger signs at any point, be ready to intervene with a towel to avoid being bitten. **If the guinea pigs draw blood or become tangled in a "ball" as they try to bite each other, immediately separate them and do not try to put them back together.**



Many people separate their piggies too soon. Understanding what's normal is an important part of this process. More detailed information about introductions and success stories can be found on Guinea Lynx and on the Los Angeles Guinea Pig Rescue Youtube channel.

**Normal:** hiding, crying, sniffing, chasing, chattering, rumble strutting, mounting, hair pulling, nose-offs, circling, butt dragging, yawning

Do not intervene.

**Warning behavior:** standing on hind legs, raised hair, aggressive chattering, lunging at each other

Grab your towel and prepare to intervene. If the pigs both launch toward each other, you can cover them with your towel, taking care not to squish them. Sometimes the surprise will cause a reset and the tensions will subside. Keep a close eye on all of the piggies.

**Danger behavior:** flying ball of fur (two pigs locked in battle), or deliberate blood drawn

Throw in your towel to separate them immediately (never use your bare hands)! Piggies do not play fight. Inspect them for cuts; if there are no injuries, you can place them back into the space at opposite ends and watch very closely. If they continue to attack, you may need to end introductions.

**If blood is drawn, end introductions immediately. This is rare but needs to be taken seriously.**

It is possible that the piggies can be successfully introduced at another time, but let them take a break for a few days as the introduction process can be very stressful for them. Sometimes a buddy bath, a bigger space, or letting them get to know each other first through a grid separator can help.



## Ups & Downs

It is possible that two guinea pigs who have lived together for years in harmony may decide one day that they will no longer live together. If your piggies begin to fight constantly, or seriously injure each other, you may need to split them up for good. Baby guinea pigs usually respect hierarchy and do not challenge older guinea pigs, but as they grow older and enter their teenage phase, they may decide to take over a new position within their pack. Once they have gotten closer to 2 years old, they will likely settle in to their role and not be as interested in challenging their cage mates.

It is also normal for guinea pigs to regularly squabble or rumble or squeal around each other. Sometimes that just doesn't go away. But, if your piggies are not hurting each other, it is best to leave them together. **Do keep an eye out for bullying, though!** If a guinea pig is being constantly chased so that it cannot rest, or if it's regularly being prevented from eating, it should be permanently separated from the bullying piggie. Keeping more than 1 hay rack and pellet bowl and water bottle can be very helpful.

## Other Pets

**Never house guinea pigs with other species** (rabbits, for example). As a general rule, they should not be allowed to interact with your other pets. A rabbit's hind legs are very powerful and the rabbit can easily accidentally kill the guinea pig by just jumping nearby. And unfortunately, it has happened that cats or dogs appear to get along with or ignore a guinea pig, but they were actually just waiting for their chance to attack.



Guinea pigs can be very entertaining to watch, and each has their own distinct personality. While some are more active and others are expert loungers, healthy guinea pigs should be alert and curious. As you and your piggies get to know each other, you'll better understand them and be able to identify when some thing is a little off about their behavior.

## Taming

Guinea pigs are prey animals, so it is normal for them to be skittish and not want to be picked up. They are easily startled so use a quiet voice and slow movements to help keep them calm. When lifting and carrying your guinea pig, support the entire body with two hands. Guinea pigs are easily injured if dropped, and while they generally do not bite, they may if not properly handled. Some pigs enjoy being held and pet, while others just want to stay in their cage. Some warm up to you the more you hold them, while others will go their whole lives running every time you pick them up.

Frequent interaction with your guinea pigs, with respect to how they like to be treated, will help to foster your bond. And even the ones who don't like to be handled can still be affectionate from inside the cage. Your piggies will get to know your voice and your habits, and they will settle into your routines. Some can learn tricks, and some can learn their names, but almost all know the sound of a refrigerator opening or of a bag crinkling. They have their own ways of communicating, you just need to learn how to speak their language.

## Guinea Pigs and Kids

As you may have gathered, guinea pigs are wonderful pets, but they do require a level of care, knowledge, and commitment that is not the same as required by a goldfish or hamster. Children should not be the primary person in your home responsible for your piggie's care. Small children should be supervised when holding a guinea pig and should NOT be allowed to pick one up from out of the cage or carry it around. Kids may squeeze too tightly or accidentally drop a guinea pig with tragic consequences. Further, guinea pigs can be very squeamish or suddenly bolt, and a fall can be very dangerous for them.

## Sounds

Guinea pigs can be quite chatty with each other, or even talk to themselves as they wander about their cage. Many of their noises are quite endearing, as they're your piggie's way of showing you that he's happy. Squeals and rumbles and teeth chattering can have many different meanings from fear to excitement, and should be taken within their context. Some piggies purr while being pet, but one of the most rare sounds is chirping. This noise is not understood, but it is well recorded that some piggies actually chirp just like a bird, usually while they look to be in some kind of trance.

## Popcorns & Zoomies

You know how an excited dog might run laps at full speed just because something excited him? Piggies do that too—an expression of pure delight. Young guinea pigs will often break out in a joyous bouquet of romps and jumps, prompting some owners to wonder if their pets are experiencing seizures. The hind legs are thrown skyward and the little pigs jump crazily about. This is a sign your piggie is happy, and can happen because of a clean cage, fresh hay, attention from a friend, or any other happy little thought. As your pig gets older, the jumps and hops will lessen but an old pig can still give an unexpected twitch if it feels like it. But don't worry if your guinea pig doesn't popcorn at all. It doesn't mean he isn't happy. Some guinea pigs are more reserved than others, just like us humans.



Because guinea pigs are prey animals, they will try to hide any sign of illness or injury as long as they can. So, often by the time owners notice something is wrong, it may be too late. Getting to know your guinea pig and their normal behavior will help you identify when something might not be right. Even the slightest change in their behavior—a new spot to lie down, a skipped meal, a lazy afternoon—can all be signs of something more.

## Sexing

**Before you put any two guinea pigs together, you should always confirm that they are of the same sex.** Pet stores do commonly mis-sex guinea pigs, so it's best to always check your piggies, just in case. Should you determine you have a male and female, separate them immediately whether you suspect the female is pregnant or not.



### Boy or Girl?

Referred to as “boars,” male guinea pigs are generally larger than females, have smaller nipples, and when sexually mature, clearly visible scrotal pouches. Gently pressing on the belly near the genitals will allow the penis to emerge. Referred to as “sows,” female guinea pigs have a Y shaped opening which is usually sealed with a vaginal closure membrane.

### Sexual Maturity

It can be very difficult to sex young guinea pigs, so waiting until they are 2-3 weeks old should help you determine their sex more easily. **But don't wait too long, guinea pigs can reach sexual maturity as early as 4 weeks of age!** This means that a baby guinea pig can get pregnant and have babies, and then can get pregnant again by those babies, having a second litter all while still very young.

## Pregnancy

Pregnancy lasts from 59 to 73 days and average litter size is 1-4 but can be as many as 7 or more. Pregnancy is difficult on guinea pigs. The mother generally carries several pups and her weight may double, putting stress on her circulation system and other organs. Even with the best care, sows can suffer from dystocia, hypocalcemia, a prolapsed uterus, or pregnancy toxemia. This is why pregnant guinea pigs need the right nutrition, so be sure to give your piggie plenty of vegetables and extra vitamin C. A little extra fruit during pregnancy will also help provide the necessary sugars to prevent toxemia.

### Birthing

**Giving birth is dangerous** for a sow, especially for a young sow, as babies are born large and ready to run. For this and other reasons, **breeding guinea pigs is not recommended!** It's hard to predict when a sow will go into labor, but they are generally much less active the week or two before they go into labor. The birthing process begins when the mother starts to “hiccup” and will take between 15-40 minutes. With each contraction, the mother will hunch and grab her baby, pulling it out. She bites through the umbilical cord and cleans the embryonic sac off the baby's face. After the delivery, the mother will clean up the traces of the birth. **If your laboring piggie squeals in pain, bleeds, or collapses due to exhaustion, or if the birth is taking too long, rush her to the vet!**

Babies will be born with fur, nails, and teeth, and they will begin to open their eyes and walk around just hours after they're born. Within 24 hours, they will begin to eat hay and veggies. Every two hours, they will drink from their mother and wean after 3-4 weeks of age. And remember, babies will reach sexual maturity within a matter of weeks, so **males and females will need to be separated by the time they reach 3 weeks of age.**



## Spaying & Neutering

Spaying is a dangerous procedure for guinea pigs, so it should only be done when medically necessary. Neutering is also risky and should only be done when you plan to put the male guinea pig with female because he cannot get along with any other males, and it should only be done by a vet with experience performing this same surgery on other guinea pigs. **Neutering will not make a male less dominant or otherwise change their behavior or personality.**

## Normal & Not Normal

You'll want to always pay attention to your piggies when you hold them. Feel their bodies and take a closer look to see if you notice anything out of the ordinary.



### Nose

Noses should be clean and not snotty or wet. Frequent sneezing can be a sign of a bacterial infection.

### Ears

Ears should be relatively clean. Ears should not be too dirty, crusty, or inflamed. A head tilt can indicate an ear infection, but it can also indicate blindness!



### Eyes

Eyes should be clear and symmetrical. White secretions of milky white fluid is normal. Piggies use the fluid to clean their faces. Some piggies have eyes that always seem to sag a little bit on the bottom; fatty pockets can be normal and do not hurt the piggie. Eyes should not be crusty, bulging, sunken, or cloudy (cloudiness is normal with aging piggies). Ruby or red eyes are completely normal and do not indicate sight issues.



### Feet

Normal feet should have a clean and soft footpad with nails that are not too long. Scabs, crusts, and swelling are not normal. In some older guinea pigs we sometimes see a tough growth on the sides of the front paws. This is referred to as "spurs" and perfectly normal. This is basically dead skin (callus) and you want to cut these off to prevent the foot pad from ripping if the spur snags on something. Always check for these in older pigs.

## Fur and Skin

Healthy looking and even fur and skin are normal. A modest amount of shedding is normal and does vary by individual guinea pig. Lumps, scabs, dandruff, and hair loss (in patches or general) are not normal.



### Teeth

A guinea pig's teeth never stop growing. Hay will help keep their teeth from overgrowing too much, but you still want to provide your piggie with things to chew and keep an eye on their teeth. Crooked, overgrown, or damaged teeth are not normal, and are an often overlooked cause of change in eating. Teeth problems can result in fatal weight loss, and almost always originate in the molars. While a gap in the teeth is uncommon (as seen in the top right corner), it is not an issue if the guinea pig can still eat properly. If teeth become overgrown or curve inward, your vet can trim them to prevent any resulting issues.



## Droppings

Droppings are an indicator of a good diet and should be uniform and oval, medium to dark brown. Aromatic greenish droppings may be caecal pellets, which the guinea pig re-ingests. These poops, called “cud,” that piggies eat are necessary for good nutrition.

Not normal:

- Clumped droppings - may indicate impaction (males)
- Smaller droppings and/or teardrop shaped droppings - may indicate dehydration and/or eating less food.
- Pitted soft droppings may be caused by an overgrowth of yeast in the intestinal tract - a vet can diagnose
- Diarrhea - can be life threatening. If the droppings are merely soft, temporarily withholding veggies may help.
- Light colored droppings signify a gap in the proper nutrients. Review the information on high quality pellets and hay. Your piggie's poops should improve as his diet improves.



## Urine

Urine may be clear to cloudy in color. Calcium compounds in the urine cause this cloudiness. Normal urine is not gritty in texture. Dried urine may leave powdery white calcium compounds. Very young guinea pigs often have an orange or brown tint to their urine. Urine sometimes changes to an orange color on standing.

Not normal:

- Gritty compounds - may indicate sludge in the bladder, which feels coarse and sandy. Strong smelling urine may be a sign of dehydration or infection. Powdery deposits are normal. Rub the deposits between your fingers to determine if they are powdery or gritty.
- Blood in urine is not normal and may be due to a urinary tract infection, bladder stones, or (in females) reproductive problems like pyometra (an infection of the lining of the uterus).
- Incontinence is not normal. Your guinea pig should be relatively dry. If its fur is constantly wet and/or there is an odor, be sure to have your pet checked out for a urinary tract infection or other problem.

## Boar Glue

Yes, male guinea pig ejaculate is normal! Ejaculate is generally white in color and appears rubbery. It is sometimes referred to as “boar glue” due to its tendency to stick to just about everything, and the supreme difficulty of removal. It may appear as a blob or more worm-like. What isn't normal is hardening of boar glue within the penis. Be sure to check out your guinea pig if he is in discomfort or has difficulty urinating.

## Grease Gland

All guinea pigs have a grease gland where their tail might be if they had one. Some piggies (usually boys) have a gland that is much more active than others, and need butt baths to help keep their fur from getting too dirty or matted. While it won't cause problems for most guinea pigs, letting the gunk continuously build up on a pig with a more active gland can cause irritation and even infection. It's also easier to clean if addressed regularly before you're dealing with a big, clumpy mess!



## Weight

Every guinea pig is different, but a general range of healthy weight is somewhere between 900-1600 grams. When fed properly and given ample exercise, most pigs will “self-regulate” to a healthy weight. Thanks to the already rectangular shape of the guinea pig body and natural lack of a waist, combined with their thick hair coat, it can be a little bit of a challenge to tell what is lurking under the surface. The easiest way to tell the status of your pigs’ fat stores is to regularly run your hands down the entire length of the body, starting right behind the ears. In a well proportioned pig, you will be able to feel both the ribs and the backbone going “bump-bump-bump” under your fingers. These bumps should not be sharp or obvious, but palpable. If you are unable to feel those bumps – the fat stores are too thick and your pig is too chubby. If the bumps are very noticeable, then your pig may be too skinny.

## Water Consumption

Water consumption is different for each guinea pig. Consumption is dependent on temperature, taste of water, activity, and preference. A guinea pig provided ample vegetable matter (rinsed and still wet) might appear to drink very little during the day. If you are concerned, check for signs of dehydration. Possible causes of excess water consumption include: diabetes, kidney failure, pain, hunger.

Ill animals (especially those with molar problems) may be unable to eat but will drink excessive amounts of water. Make sure your guinea pig is not just playing with the water bottle (or that the water bottle is not leaking) if you suspect your pet is drinking too much.

## Life Expectancy

The average life expectancy of a healthy guinea pig is 5 to 7 years. While rare, some guinea pigs have even lived over 10 years!

## Basic Care

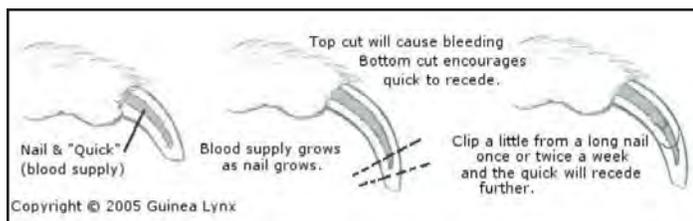
Your piggies do need regular maintenance to keep them in top shape. Keep in mind that piggies are all different, but here are some of the basics.



### Nails

Many owners do not know that they need to clip their guinea pigs’ nails at least every 6 weeks. If the nails are left for extended periods of time without attention, the bloodline advances closer to the tip. However, by trimming the nails more frequently, the bloodline miraculously recedes.

It is easiest to put your piggie on a surface that is higher than a regular table. That way you can steady and restrain the pig against your body and then grab hold of its little foot to cut each nail. Sitting on a chair with a towel in your lap will also work. With light colored nails you will be able to see how far you can clip. With the dark nails it sometimes helps shining a light underneath to see how far the “quick” grows. Using a human nail clipper may help provide more safety, but you will learn what technique and tools work best for you.



If you do trim the nail too short and cut through the bloodline, take a deep breath. You haven’t mortally wounded your little friend! It’s always a good idea to have a “styptic pencil” handy (available in the men’s shaving area of your local drug store) or some flour. Touch the end of the bleeding nail with the pencil or the powder and the bleeding will stop immediately (yes there is a little discomfort to your piggie so be strong).



### Ears

Regular ear cleaning is a good idea. Use a few drops of either Olive or Mineral oil into the flaps of the ear and massage it in. Then get a Q tip and gently remove the oil and with it will come the ear wax. Make sure you go into each fold in the ear with the Q tip. You are not cleaning the inner ear canal, just the many folds in a guinea pig's ear. You will notice also that the ear wax is the color of the skin of the ear. You want to clean the ears before you do a bath. That way you can wash away the oil that makes them look like they have greasy sideburns if not washed out.



### Bathing

Guinea pigs do clean themselves, but a bath a few times a year will help to keep their skin clean and healthy. Be sure to use lukewarm water and put a small towel in your sink or shallow bucket so that their feet have something to grab onto. Beware that most guinea pigs do not like water so you'll want to be sure you have a secure hold on them and can keep them safe if they suddenly jerk. Use a gentle and fragrance free shampoo (Gorgeous Guineas make good ones!) and be careful not to get water in your piggie's nose. **You must make sure your piggie is properly dried** before returning them to

their cage, so follow your towel dry with a blow dry. **Make sure the dryer is on the cool setting** as guinea pigs have very sensitive skin! If you put a wet or damp piggie back into their cage, it will take too long for them to dry naturally and they will likely get sick.

### Weigh Weekly

A kitchen scale comes in very handy here! By weighing weekly, you are using one of the best tools available for monitoring your guinea pig's health. What you are watching for is dramatic changes in weight. A good rule of thumb for an adult guinea pig is:

- One ounce weight fluctuation is OK.
- Two ounces - Go on alert.
- Three ounces - Extreme red alert.
- Four ounces - Get the pig to a vet.

Guinea pig weights will fluctuate slightly from one time of day to another. If you see a pattern of weight loss, see a vet!

**Any time you suspect a health problem, be sure to weigh your piggie daily!**

### Hair Trimming and Brushing

Because guinea pigs are quite low to the ground, long hair can become dirty and wet, resulting in increased bacterial growth. Keep cages clean and trim long hair to improve health. Daily brushing with a soft baby brush or a metal greyhound comb will help remove some of the loose hair and lessen shedding. Daily brushing is especially important for long haired guinea pigs, less necessary for the short haired varieties. This will help to prevent any tangling or matting, which will pull on your piggie's skin and cause them pain.



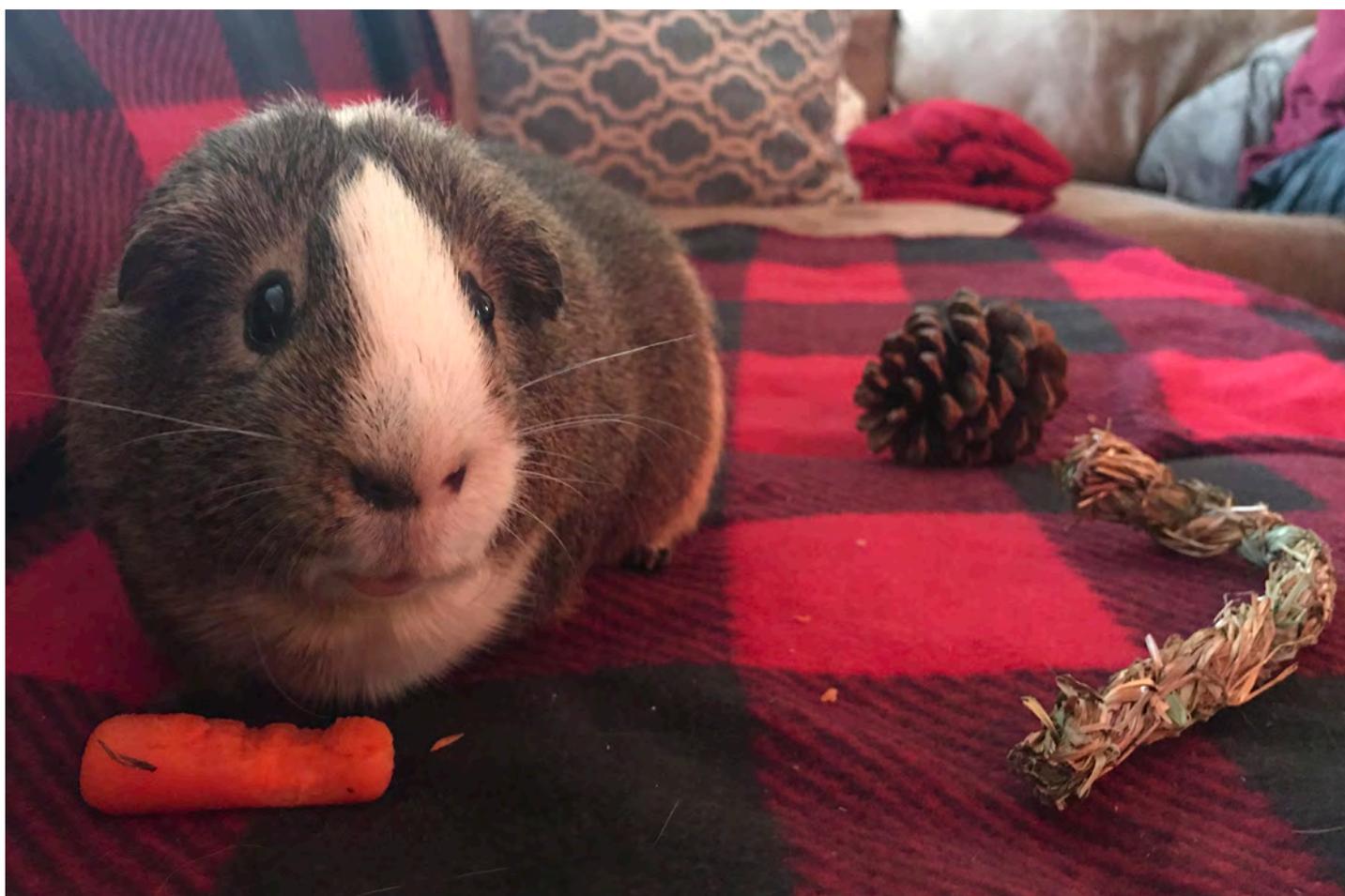
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Guinea Lynx

### Handling

Guinea pigs are gentle animals with delicate bones. Since some guinea pigs have a tendency to jump (especially when you are returning them to their cage), it is important to learn how to hold and carry them safely. Falls and jumps can result in broken bones, injury, and sometimes death.

Support the entire body. Wrap one hand securely around the chest. Restrain one front leg by placing a finger in front of it. Use your other hand to support the hind feet and rump. This hold is particularly helpful with nervous guinea pigs who have a tendency to nip when being transported (carrying can be very scary for a guinea pig).

- Some pet owners return their guinea pigs to the cage rump first to try prevent injuries from jumping.
- To tame your piggie, do not let it go when you him to his cage. Instead, once his feet touch the floor, keep your hold around his body until he stops struggling. Once your piggie has stopped trying to run away, let him go. Doing this consistently will prevent your piggie from trying to jump and run, making returning him to his cage much safer for him.
- If you happen to have a pregnant guinea pig, handle it as little as possible late in the pregnancy. A sturdy box with one side that can fold down can be used to safely transport a guinea pig. Allow the guinea pig to walk inside the box. Raise the side and then carefully lift the box and guinea pig out of the cage.





## Common Medical Conditions

**The best care for your guinea pigs is preventative care!** Guinea pigs can quickly go downhill when they are sick. And because they hide it as much as possible, you may miss early signs. If your piggie isn't acting himself or something seems new, keep a close watch and see medical attention sooner rather than later. Luckily, a number of these common conditions are preventable and fairly easily treatable when caught early on.



### Bumblefoot

Bumble foot occurs usually in older guinea pigs living in too small cages. Small cages are bad for a number of reasons but when it comes to Bumblefoot they contribute by not providing space enough to go for a stroll and blood flow to the area becomes restricted. Soiled bedding stacks up in the small space and the bacteria in the poo combined with acidic content in urine find a weak spot into the paw. The other main contributor is the bedding. I have seen guinea pigs that lived on just newspaper develop bumble foot. Wire cages are the worst and pretty much a guarantee that the guinea pig will become unhealthy.

The Los Angeles Guinea Pig Rescue has successfully treated a number of these cases with a combination of manuka honey, antibiotics, daily soaks, and bandage changes. See their Youtube channel for more info.



### Ringworm

Ringworm is fairly common in guinea pigs so don't freak out! It is a fungus that often presents on the outside and inside of the ears, around the eyes and on the nose. Though it can appear anywhere on their body it is most often discovered in those areas. It is the same as Athlete's Foot in humans. Ringworm most often does not require veterinary assistance and simple over the counter creams and shampoo can clear it up. It is highly contagious however, so wash your hands after touching the guinea pig and wear an apron of some sort to prevent spores clinging to your clothing. If left untreated,

ringworm can be very painful and become serious for your piggie, so seek medical attention sooner rather than later before treatment becomes much harder and more expensive.

Guinea pigs can get ringworm from another infected guinea pig but it can also develop in a guinea pig that has not had any recent interactions with other animals at all. They simply carry the spores with them and in times of stress or a diminished immune system the fungus can get the overhand. This sometimes happens in a cage with two animals living together. Only one will get the fungus and the other animal remains totally unaffected. (The same goes for lice and mites).

### Mange Mites

Mange is not the same as ringworm, it is a parasitic infection. These are little mites, often invisible to the naked eye, that cause itching skin in guinea pigs. They often occur when the guinea pig is suffering from illness, vitamin C deficiency, or old age. Guinea pigs often hurt themselves by scratching at the itch. They may develop secondary bacterial infections. There will be hair loss, crusty skin and scaly skin. The guinea pig needs immediate veterinary treatment as these mites can result in seizures and even death.



## Upper Respiratory Infections

This one is fairly common in guinea pigs who are purchased from a pet store, because they come from the equivalent of puppy mills with horrible conditions. **Guinea pigs do not catch colds, and they will not get better on their own**, so it's important to pay attention and visit a vet if your piggie is showing any signs of respiratory distress (heavy breathing, wheezing, hooting, runny nose, regularly sneezing, etc.) If caught early, antibiotics can help to solve the problem quickly. If caught not so early, these infections can take months of medication and still may lead to other problems. **Untreated URIs are almost always fatal.** Remember to consider your piggie's surroundings as it might be something in his environment that is irritating him—perhaps the wrong bedding or a fragrance in the area.

## Urinary Tract Infections

Urinary tract infections are common in guinea pigs. Their short legs put them low to the ground where they are more likely to pick up bacteria from wet bedding and droppings (cage cleaning is important!). The most common noticeable signs of a UTI are blood in the urine and squealing while peeing. UTIs are generally treated with a safe and effective antibiotic like Bactrim (trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole) for two or more weeks. Many guinea pigs require longer treatment to clear up the infection and allow the bladder walls time to heal.



### Bladder Stones

Bladder stones (also called uroliths or urinary calculi) are hard, stone-like structures usually composed of calcium carbonate which form in the bladder. Kidney stones can also form in the kidneys and ureters but this is less frequent and may not be treatable. Bladder stones can become lodged in the urethra slowing or completely blocking urination. This is especially dangerous for boars, as their urethra is narrower than that of a sow. **If a guinea pig cannot urinate, it is an emergency.** Signs of stones include blood in urine, squealing while urinating, squeaking while passing fecal pellets. Your guinea pig may be hunched or strain while urinating or passing feces or may show general signs of illness like changes in appetite, depression, or decreased activity. Stones can sometimes cause so much pain that they interfere with mobility.

The only change a few pet owners noticed was heavy breathing, most likely indicating pain. So if something seems “off”, stones may be a possibility. Your vet will need to take an x-ray to confirm the diagnosis.

If bladder stones are present, surgery is likely required. Most stones do not break down on their own and are too large for the guinea pig to pass. This is especially true for males. Surgery is especially difficult for males since their urethra is so small and delicate, and likely to tear. This damage would be life threatening, so if your vet does not have experience with bladder stone surgery, ask for a referral.

It is important to note that new stones may reform within months or even weeks of surgery. Because guinea pigs are very small and delicate, surgery is already almost always risky (anesthesia is tough on piggies), so surgery may not be an option for older piggies who may find themselves with another stone before they've even recovered. In aging guinea pigs, bladder stones can become a comfort care situation which can last for an unpredictable amount of time. Some success has been seen with Chanca Piedra (search Stone Breaker on Amazon) which is believed to help break up the stones into smaller pieces that can be passed. It has happened that a senior guinea pig lived another 18 months after his bladder stone diagnosis and passed some smaller pieces while taking half a capsule of the herb every day.



While this guide contains much of the information you need to successfully care for your piggie, there is still a lot of information not included. The helpful resources listed below will give you some guidance for expanding your knowledge and exploring the wonderful world of guinea pigs on your own!



## Supplies

### **Guineapigcagesstore.com**

Official website for awesome C&C cages, supplies, and more.

### **Smallpetselect.com**

Small family-owned company dedicated to high quality hay, bedding, treats, and toys for your piggie.

## Important Info

### **GuineaLynx.com**

Medical and care guide with expert knowledge and advice, as well as an active forum.



## Youtube

### **Saskia from the Los Angeles Guinea Pig Rescue**

Fantastic resource for educational videos all about taking care of your guinea pigs! Watch how to do nail trims, clean ears, treat bumblefoot, and more. Plenty of fun videos too—like baby guinea pigs and rescue tours.



## Facebook Pages/Groups

### **Saskia at the Los Angeles Guinea Pig Rescue - @laguineapigrescue**

Facebook page for the country's largest guinea pig rescue. Tons of helpful resources and expert advice, with lots of great videos and pictures.

### **Guinea Pig Zone - @GuineaPigZone**

Facebook group dedicated to improving the lives of and celebrating guinea pigs. Mostly fun videos and pictures, but plenty of helpful posts too.

### **Cavy Savvy Guinea Pig Community - @cavysavvyguineapigcommunity**

Facebook group committed to sharing knowledge and raising awareness about guinea pigs and their care. Lots of fun videos and pictures too! Creators are based in Australia, but the group has thousands of members from around the world.



**Did you know that “exotics” education for veterinarians includes almost no guinea pig training?** Most veterinary school training for exotics focuses on rabbits and birds, so when choosing your new vet, you’ll want to do some homework. Many vets will tell you they will or do see exotics (guinea pigs fall in this category), but be sure they have enough experience with guinea pigs before you decide they are the right vet for you.

Guinea pigs are small animals with delicate bodies, and sometimes they can have complicated and urgent medical treatment needs. That’s why **it’s very important to find the right vet for your piggies *before* you actually need them.**

The following is a list of veterinarians in the area that have experience with guinea pigs. This list is meant to be a helpful starting point for your own research and vetting, not an endorsement.

### **Intermountain Pet Hospital - Overland**

**Dr. Davis, Dr. Konsella, or Dr. Wunz**

800 West Overland Road  
Meridian, Idaho 83642  
208.888.2910

### **Intermountain Pet Hospital - Chinden**

**Dr. Sauer**

6320 N Saguaro Hills Ave  
Meridian, Idaho 83646  
208.888.2457

### **Treasure Valley Veterinary Hospital**

**Dr. Hondo-Rust**

2600 S Meridian Rd  
Meridian, ID 83642  
208.888.4844

### **Idaho Veterinary Hospital**

**Dr. Hopwood or Dr. Calhoun**

1420 N Midland Blvd  
Nampa, ID 83651  
208.466.4614

### **All Pet Complex**

**Dr. Wardwell**

7660 Horseshoe Bend Road  
Boise, ID 83714  
208.853.1000

### **Ada Animal Hospital Annex**

**Dr. Loertscher**

8250 W. Victory Rd,  
Boise, ID 83709  
208.362.5329

### **Broadway Veterinary Hospital**

**Dr. Sessions**

350 East Linden Street  
Boise, Idaho 83706  
208.344.5592

### **Northwest Veterinary Medical Group**

**Dr. Wethered**

7107 W. Fairview Ave.  
Boise, ID 83704  
208.389.9111