



Thank you for choosing to adopt an animal. The Humane Society of Harford County is a small group of dedicated people – some paid staff and many volunteers – working very hard to find homes just like yours for about 3,500 homeless pets each year. We rely on the generosity, the care, and the compassion of our community to aide in this life-saving work.

By adopting a pet you have already joined the ranks of those saving lives and for that we thank you. We hope that your life with your new pet will be as happy and fulfilling as possible. With this packet, we have provided some information to get your new relationship off on the right foot. Whether you are a first timer or a seasoned pet owner, we encourage you to utilize the information provided in this packet and contact HSHC with any questions. Adopting a pet means adding a new member to your family. To us it means joining ours as well, and we are here to help you with your pet in any way we can.

**HSHC adoption counselors can be reached by calling 410.836.1090 ext. 105 or by email at [adopt@harfordshelter.org](mailto:adopt@harfordshelter.org) to answer any questions you might have about your new pet.**

Your packet contains:

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Welcome to the Humane Society of Harford County's Guinea Pig Manual. Here you will learn all about guinea pigs: how to feed them, handle them, about their behavior, how to choose a cage, bedding, about their health, social life, and much more – everything you need to know about guinea pig care in one place!

Guinea pigs are fun and rewarding pets to have around. As they live between 4-8 years (in average), they are a long-term commitment, and if properly cared for, they will be in your life for a long time!

Here are some other fun facts about your new guinea pig:

1. They are most active during dawn and dusk, when it is harder for predators to spot them
2. They will whistle when they become familiar with you and hear that you're near.
3. They will learn to whistle in response to the refrigerator door opening or the rustling of plastic bags.
4. Guinea pigs eat their own droppings. Yep. This is perfectly normal and is called coprophagy.
5. After its cage has been thoroughly cleaned, a guinea pig will usually urinate and drag its lower body across the floor of the cage to mark its territory.
6. Guinea pigs are highly social and enjoy the company of other piggies and people

## Checklist of Supplies

Here's a list of the necessities you'll need to help your new guinea pig stay healthy and happy!

### *Housing & Bedding*

- ☐ Appropriate size and type of cage
- ☐ Carefresh or other appropriate bedding
- ☐ Drip water bottle
- ☐ Food bowls
- ☐ Hiding house



### *Food*

- ☐ Fortified guinea pig diet
- ☐ Fresh water
- ☐ Fresh fruits and vegetables, especially those with a high Vitamin C content
- ☐ Vitamin C drops
- ☐ Timothy hay (unlimited supply)
- ☐ Treat sticks and chews
- ☐ Mineral wheel





### *Extras*

- ☐ Books and magazines
- ☐ Hay holder
- ☐ Cage cleaner & disinfectant (read and follow label instructions)
- ☐ Nail clippers
- ☐ Toys

## Housing Your Guinea Pig

Many of the ready-made cages sold in pet stores are not suitable for guinea pigs—despite the fact they are advertised as being so. Most of them are too small and some even have wire grid floors—which should never be used to house guinea pigs.

Bigger is better! For the health and well-being of your guinea pigs, provide as large a living area as you can manage. Cage size standards are listed below. Following these standards will result in happier, healthier, and perkier guinea pigs.

Cage Size Standards			
	Minimum		Preferred
# of Pigs	Square Feet	in Inches	
	5.7 sq ft	39" x 21"	more is better
	7.3 sq ft	46" x 23"	10.5 sq feet
	10.5 sq ft	50" x 30"	13 sq feet
	13 sq ft	30" x 62"	more is better

### Cage Accessories

- Water **drip bottle**
- **Bowl for pellets** (make sure it's heavy, to prevent tipping)
- **Hiding place** (like a small wooden house) for the piggie to have a sense of security, a place to sleep and a retreat to run away to if feeling threatened.
- **Cage hayrack & hammock**

### Non-Toxic Toys

We recommend creating your own home-made toys. They are cheap, available, and usually most fun for your pets.

- Most important toy: **Second guinea pig**. No toy can replace the live company of the same species.
- Simplest and cheapest toy to make: **crumpled piece of clean white paper**. Piggies love that stuff, jostling it around, chewing on it, tearing it apart.
- Various non-toxic toys (each cavy reacts differently on various objects). For example, **naturally-wooden toys (no pressure treated wood) with chimes inside** usually gets them interested. Plus, it will last long and they can safely chew on it.
- **PVC tubes** for sneaking around. NOTE: Make sure they are wide enough, and airy. Keep them under observation to avoid mishaps.
- Something to cuddle with (for example **old socks filled with shavings**).
- A **mirror**. Just be careful with it – the safest way is to install it on the outside of the cage.
- **Hidden treats** within the cage.
- Toilet **paper rolls**, stuffed with hay.
- New hideouts, for example made from **boxes**, with cut-out windows, doors and alternative passages. They love to explore around.

## Cleaning the Cage

1. Remove guinea pig(s) from the cage and dispose of all bedding materials.
2. Rinse the cage with warm water and soap and scrub the cage floor.
3. IF THERE ARE HARD CALCIUM DEPOSITS: Pour white vinegar on the calcium deposits and let it soak for several minutes.
4. **Rinse** thoroughly with clean warm water to remove all remaining soap/vinegar/acids, then dry the guinea pig cage thoroughly.

**Note:** *Wet bedding* can easily mold and cause unnecessary health risks for your guinea pig.

Regular cage cleaning will keep your cavy healthier. If you don't clean the cage frequently, urine can break down into ammonia which could be harmful to your pet's respiratory system. Your guinea pig can also get urinary tract infections (URI) because of the harmful bacterial growth.

## Bedding

Paper Bedding. Paper bedding is soft and absorbent and most brands contain minimal dust. There are several brands to choose from, including: Oxbow Pure Comfort Bedding, Carefresh & Critter Care.

Aspen. Aspen is the ONLY acceptable wood bedding. It is somewhat less absorbent than paper beddings and does not have paper beddings' odor control. It also tends to be lighter than most paper beddings, so it has a greater tendency to fly about when the guinea pigs run or jump in their cage. Aspen, however, tends to be cheaper than paper bedding. Paper bedding can be mixed with Aspen for cost-savings.

Blends. Blends mix paper bedding with wood bedding. They provide the odor control benefit of paper bedding but tend to cost less than paper bedding due to wood (a cheaper material) being mixed in. Don't buy blends with cedar or pine mixed in, because the woods give off aromatic hydrocarbons (phenols) that are harmful to guinea pigs. The following is a safe blend: Carefresh Shavings Plus Pet Bedding.

**Note:** Do NOT use these: Cedar, Pine, Corncob, Straw, Wire Flooring, Sawdust, Cat Litter, or Small Animal Potty Training Litter.

## Diet & Treats

### Water

- Unflavored bottled drinking water or fresh spring water is recommended.
- Provide water in a cage-mounted drip bottle (to prevent contamination and/or spilling, which is usual for dish servings).
- Clean the drip bottle nozzle frequently (hay and pellet gunk can breed harmful bacteria and clog the water flow if not cleaned regularly).
- Guinea Pigs need a constant supply of *clean, daily fresh, room-temperature* plain water for optimal performance.
- Avoid distilled water (it does not provide minerals that are essential to important body functions).
- Avoid water high in minerals (especially calcium).
- Avoid putting medications, vitamins or any other supplements in water.
- Untreated tap water is usually not recommended (possibility of chlorine and heavy metal contamination), but this depends on the quality of your home water distribution which can be tested.

### Pellets

Guinea pigs should be given a pellet based food - about 1/8 cup per guinea pig per day (for pregnant, nursing, or guinea pigs 6 months or less, pellets should be available at all times even if this means feeding more than 1/8 cup per day). Guinea pigs 6 months or less (or pregnant or nursing) may be fed pellets with some alfalfa. Guinea pigs over 6 months should be fed timothy pellets. Pellets containing alfalfa contain a large of calcium (alfalfa is calcium-rich). Guinea pigs 6 months or less need the extra calcium for development; guinea pigs over 6 months don't. A diet containing a large amount of calcium can cause stones to form in a guinea pig. Stones are painful and often require surgery to remove. Guinea pigs over 6 months, therefore, should be fed timothy pellets to reduce the likelihood of a stone forming.

Pellets fed to guinea pigs of any age should be free from "junk" like nuts, seeds, etc., which cause obesity and pose a choking hazard.

The following is a list of quality pellets.

- For guinea pigs 6 months or less:
  - Oxbow Performance
  - Sweet Meadow blend pellets
  - Kleenmamas alfalfa pellets
- For guinea pigs over 6 months:
  - Oxbow Cavy Cuisine
  - Small Pet Select timothy pellets
  - Sweet Meadow timothy pellets
  - Mazuri timothy pellets
  - Kleenmamas timothy pellets
  - Sunseed Vita Sunscription Guinea Pig Natural Timothy Diet  
(Must be this variety - none of the other Sunseed varieties are acceptable)



## Fruits & Veggies

Feed your guinea pig primarily green leafy vegetables and don't feed the same veggies every day. Variety is the key for maintaining a healthy piggie. Some vegetables can be provided a few times a day; some a few times a week. Never feed wilted or spoiled food, and it is strongly recommended to remove uneaten vegetables to prevent spoiling/rotting. Be cautious about vegetables from the freezer – if the food is too cold, guinea pigs can get diarrhea.

**NOT recommended:** *iceberg lettuce (high in nitrates and low in nutrients; can cause diarrhea if given in excess).*

**NOT recommended:** *any vegetable in the cabbage family (it won't kill them, but could cause bloat if feeding continuously), or beet greens (too high in oxalates).*

### Veggies Guinea Pigs Can Eat *Everyday*:

- Cucumber: Little nutritional value, but high water content – especially appreciated in summer
- Bell Peppers: Green and Yellow: Remove seeds
- Carrots: Both the root and the green tops are recommended (BUT take note that high sugar and Vitamin A content require moderate consumption)
- Green leaf lettuce
- Butterhead lettuce
- Red leaf lettuce
- Cilantro
- Escarole
- Swiss chard (chard, silverbeet)
- Curly endive
- Belgian endive
- Sweet Potato leaves
- Chicory greens
- Coriander
- Dill
- Zucchini
- Arugula
- Radicchio
- Artichoke



### Veggies Guinea Pigs Can Eat *Occasionally*:

- Bell Peppers: Red/Orange (remove seeds)
- Asparagus (low in Vitamin C)
- Turnip greens
- Basil
- Green leek tops: feed in moderation
- Thyme
- Pumpkin (WITHOUT seeds)
- Watercress

- Romaine (only small amounts recommended – it has a poor calcium/phosphorus ratio that can cause kidney stone problems)
- Spinach (small amounts recommended to avoid potential kidney stone problems)
- Broccoli leaves and peeled broccoli stem: Related to the cabbage family, so small doses recommended
- Cauliflower: Related to the cabbage family, so small doses recommended
- Kale: Related to the cabbage family, so small doses recommended
- Chinese Cabbage/pak-choi: Related to the cabbage family, so small doses recommended
- Corn silks and husks: When in season
- Parsley greens and root: Very high in calcium, so caution is recommended if guinea pig is prone to developing bladder stones
- Rutabaga
- Celery: Cut into small pieces as it is very stringy, to avoid guinea pig choking
- Celery leaves
- Fresh Grass: Clean, pesticide-free, not soiled by dogs/cats/etc, NOT cut by a lawn mower
- Tomato: Remove the poisonous tomato top (green part). Remove seeds if using a slice from a larger tomato
- Beetroot: Recommended in raw form rather than pickled. High in antioxidants and other nutrients. Feeding too often may result in red urine
- Carrot greens (high in calcium, potassium and vitamin C)
- Fennel

#### Fruits Guinea Pigs Can Eat *Occasionally*:

- Apple: Thin wedge, include peel, REMOVE SEEDS which contain cyanide compound
- Pear: Thin wedge, include peel, no seeds
- Apricot: Dried, a couple small pieces
- Banana: Relatively low in vitamin C but rich in other nutrients. BUT, could cause constipation, so feed in great moderation.
- Blueberries
- Blackberries
- Cantaloupe
- Seedless Grapes or Raisins: NOT BOTH, and very sparingly
- Orange
- Strawberries: Another popular summer fruit, also very high in vitamin C
- Watermelon: high water content, could cause diarrhoea
- Cranberries: very high in vitamin C; too much can cause STOMACH UPSET
- Grapefruit: Pink, red, and white varieties are all good sources of vitamin C, but they can be too sour for some pigs. They are high in WATER content so are refreshing in warm weather.
- Kiwi: Extremely high in vitamin C and considered very good for cavies
- Mango: High water content makes it very refreshing
- Raspberries: Some guinea pigs find these too tart to eat; others love them
- Cherries: without pits
- Peach
- Nectarine
- Plum
- Figs

- Dates
- Dried fruits: Full of concentrated sugar, so give rarely and in very small doses

**NOTES:**

1. Many fruits are full of natural sugar, have fruit acid and possible low Ca:P ratio, which could lead to bladder problems.
2. Cut the fruits to small pieces to avoid mouth soreness.
3. Because of the high sugar content, fruits must be provided occasionally, as a treat. This means small quantities (such as 1/8 of an orange, 1/8 of an apple, etc.), only once or twice per week.

**Fruit to Avoid Giving Your Guinea Pig:**

Guinea pigs will eat most types of fruit, but some vets believe that grapes can lead to kidney disease and are best avoided. If you do decide to feed them to your pets, be sure to give them seedless grapes.

**Treats**

Pet stores sell many treats for guinea pigs. The honey sticks, seed sticks, yogurt drops, gummy vitamin C chews, and other sweet treats sold at pet stores aren't good for guinea pigs. They contain too much sugar and too many calories. Don't provide them. If you want to provide a treat, any of the Oxbow Simple Rewards are fine when provided in moderation. Oxbow Simple Rewards contain no added sugar or fattening ingredients like seeds and nuts.

**Hay**

Guinea pigs are grazing animals and unlimited amounts of grass hay. Grass hay provides the fiber guinea pigs need for digestion and helps grind their constantly growing teeth. Without grass hay, guinea pigs teeth may become too long, which may hinder eating and cause other problems. Eating the long hay strands keeps their digestive system moving, and in good health.

**What kind of hay to provide?**

Alfalfa contains a large amount of calcium. A diet containing a large amount of calcium can cause stones to form in a guinea pig. Stones are painful and often require surgery to remove. To reduce the likelihood of a stone forming, guinea pigs should be provided with unlimited mixed grass (e.g., orchard grass or bluegrass) or timothy hay. Alfalfa hay may be provided in addition to mixed grass to pregnant or nursing guinea pigs, who need the extra calcium for the development of their pups, or to guinea pigs younger than 6 months, who need the extra calcium for development. Check with your exotic vet if you have a pregnant, nursing, or very young guinea pig on proper nutrition.

**Where to buy hay?**

There are many places where you can buy orchard grass or timothy and a few where you can buy bluegrass. Look for 2nd cut. 1st cut has too many stems and is too hard for guinea pigs.

- Small Pet Select. High quality timothy hay. Order online and have it delivered right to your door in the Continental U.S.!
- Sweet Meadow Farms timothy hay
- KMS Hayloft timothy hay or bluegrass

## Allergies?

Grass hay (timothy hay or orchard grass) must be available to guinea pigs at all times in non-compressed form (compressed hay cakes sold by Oxbow are an ok treat). Please make sure that you don't have allergies that would interfere with providing grass hay and/or keeping the guinea pig before adopting. If you are unsure whether you have allergies to grass hay, buy a bag of grass hay (timothy or orchard grass) and keep it open in your home to test for any reaction. Those with allergies sometimes find that a home air filter reduces their reaction.

## Vitamin C

Vitamin C is important to the health of guinea pigs. Guinea pigs unfortunately do not make their own vitamin C and rely on getting it from their diet. The pellets, vegetables, and fruits guinea pigs consume contain vitamin C. It is a good idea to provide guinea pigs with supplemental vitamin C, especially older guinea pigs who often don't absorb nutrients as well and sick guinea pigs who need the vitamin C for recovery.

### Vitamin C supplements:

- Hyland Baby tab: They are a soft quick-dissolve tab with a nice lemon flavor that most guinea pigs like. They need to go right in the mouth so you need a cooperative guinea pig. One tablet per guinea pig.
- Liquid C: Not the kind from the pet store but the kind from the human health food store. It is administered orally by a syringe. Some people are concerned about the sweetener. The sweetener covers up the bitter taste of vitamin C. Without it, you likely wouldn't get your guinea pigs to take liquid C. Administration of liquid C gets your guinea pigs used to taking liquids by oral syringe, which makes future administration of medicines easier (it won't be a new, scary thing).
- Oxbow Vitamin C Biscuit: Many guinea pigs like these. Others find them too hard to eat, especially as they get older.

### Don't provide:

- Vitamin C drops pet stores sell for water bottles and topping food. These drops are bitter and if you put them in guinea pigs' water or on their food, then the water or food becomes bitter. This will cause your guinea pigs to drink less (or eat less if placed on food) or not at all. These drops also are ineffective. Vitamin C degrades rapidly in water.
- Gummy vitamin C chews sold at pet stores. These contain too much sugar for guinea pigs and as a result, can cause health problems.

# Have a Healthy Piggy

## Weigh your guinea pig weekly

Weigh your guinea pig weekly using a small kitchen food scale. Put a small, open box on top of the scale (large enough for your guinea pig to sit in), tare the scale to remove the weight of the box, and then put your guinea pig in the box to weigh him/her.

Try to weigh at the same time of day, for instance before giving your guinea pigs their breakfast veggies, to improve accuracy (after a meal, your guinea pigs may weigh more).

## Why weigh your guinea pig?

Weighing your guinea pig helps spot illness. Sometimes the only symptom of illness may be a gradual loss of weight over a few weeks. A weight loss of 10% or more (within one week and/or over several weeks) is when you should become concerned and take the guinea pig to the vet even if you see no other symptoms of illness.

## Signs of illness?

If your guinea pig has symptoms suggestive of illness (e.g., running nose, wheezing, bloated / hard belly, lethargy etc.), has lost weight, has begun to refuse foods normally eaten, and/or is not behaving normally, take him to an exotic vet with experience in treating guinea pigs right away. Your guinea pigs' life often depends on you getting veterinary care right away.

### 1. Eyes

#### *Normal:*

- Symmetrical, Open, Bright, Clear with no discharge
- Milky type liquid is also considered normal (produced during the grooming process and usually wiped away with their front feet)

#### *Not Normal:*

- Crusty, red/swollen eyes: *Possible bacterial infection*
- Watery or crusty eyes: *Possible upper respiratory infection*
- Dull and/or receding eyes: *Possible upper respiratory infection*
- Bulging eyes: *Possible infection, injury, or tooth root problem*
- Sunken eyes: *Possible dehydration*
- Opaque/Cloudy eyes (blue/grey in color): Could be protective covering due to an injury to the eye. Appears quite quickly and normally disappears once the eye starts healing
- Cataracts: *Possible sign of diabetes or old age*
- Foreign objects in eye(s): *It is not recommended to try to remove objects from your guinea pigs eye without veterinary expertise.*

### 2. Hair, Skin & Body

#### *Normal:*

- Healthy, normal looking hair and skin
- Some modest amount of shedding is considered normal

#### *Not Normal:*

- Dandruff can be identified as white flakes in the fur, similar to human dandruff. But, debris on the skin may be there for several reasons, and it does not necessary means that it is a medical condition. Beware of the other symptoms: a parasite or fungal infection is possible if the guinea pig seems shedding more than normal, is

very itchy, or has a lot of dandruff. Veterinary examination is recommended in any case.

- Excessive hair loss (possible in patches, or general hair loss): Combined with excessive itching could indicate guinea pig *mites* (parasites which are extremely common and very painful, but treatment is easy. Owner should treat mites as soon as possible.
- Lumps
- Scabs
- Dry flaky skin
- Scratches
- Sores
- Rough or puffed-up coat: *Possible upper respiratory infection*
- Swollen abdomen: Bloat (intestinal blockage and/or a dangerous build-up of gas, painful and potentially fatal)

NOTE: *It is recommended to also check under the guinea pig undersides and under the chin.*

### 3. Ears

*Normal:*

- Smooth & clean

*Not Normal:*

- Inflamed
- Crust on edges of ears: *Possible parasite infestation, fungal or bacterial infection*
- Build-up of wax: Could attract parasites. Clean the wax using warm water with gentle movements. It is not recommended to poke cotton buds in guinea pig's ears. This could cause significant amount of damage inside the ears.
- Head tilt: *Possible ear infection*

### 4. Nose

*Normal:*

- Clean nose
- No signs of discharge or watery liquid

*Not Normal:*

- Snotty nose, frequent sneezing: *Possible bacterial infection*
- Watery or crusty nose: *Possible upper respiratory infection*

### 5. Feet

*Normal:*

- 4 fingers front feet, 3 fingers back feet
- Normally looking, clean, soft footpad
- Nails trimmed at a proper length: Need cutting if too large

*Not Normal:*

- More than 4 fingers on front or more than 3 fingers on back feet (polydactyly, could be the result of inbreeding); however, this should not harm the animal and is not a reason for concern
- Swelling, Scabs, Crusts: *Could indicate Bumblefoot*
- Long nails: Need cutting
- Limping

## 6. Breathing

### *Normal:*

- The normal respiration rate for a cavy is about 80 per minute
- It is normal for some cavies to hyperventilate at times to almost double this rate

### *Not Normal:*

- Laboured breathing
- Wheezing
- Clicking sounds

## 7. Eating

### *Normal:*

- Guinea pig is normally eating its regular food
- Feeding more or less continuously
- Chewing on paper, cloth, rubber and plastic (and everything in the known Universe) is normal, but try to limit this and keep it under control

### *Not Normal:*

- Struggling to eat: *Possible dental problem*
- Refusing to eat anything: *Alerting situation, taking your pet to the veterinarian is highly recommended*

## 8. Water Drinking

### *Normal:*

- Water consumption differs for each cavy
- Consumption is dependent on several factors: temperature (during summer, water consumption is naturally higher), taste of water, activity, and preference
- Guinea pig extracts water from vegetable matter. For this reason it may appear that guinea pig drinks very little during the day
- If concerned, owner can check for signs of dehydration

### *Not Normal:*

- Drinking a lot more than normal (if taking weather temperature into consideration): It would be wise to have your guinea pig checked for diabetes.
- Possible causes of excess water consumption:
- Diabetes
- Kidney failure
- Pain
- Hunger
- NOTE: *Ill guinea pig (especially if having molar problems) may be unable to eat but will drink excessive amounts of water. If owner suspects that the animal is drinking too much, it is recommended to insure first that the water bottle is not leaking.*

## 9. Droppings

Guinea pigs excrete **2 different types of feces**: one which contains “normal” waste, and another which is produced in the animal’s cecum and is called caecotroph (also called cecotrope or night feces). Technically, caecotrophs are not a poop; they contain vitamins, minerals and some proteins that were not absorbed when firstly ingested and are reingested by the animal. They are usually greenish in color, but this is not a general rule.

### *Normal:*

- Uniform and oval, medium to dark brown
- When begin to dry out, droppings turn black
- Frequent excretion is normal

*Not Normal:*

- Teardrop shaped droppings: *Possible dehydration and/or malnutrition*
- Pitted soft droppings: *Possible overgrowth of yeast in the intestinal tract*
- Bleeding from rectal area: *Red alert*
- Diarrhea: Can be life threatening. Temporarily withholding vegetables may help if the droppings are merely soft
- No droppings for more than 12 hours
- Clumped droppings: *Possible impaction (males)*

10. Urine

*Normal:*

- Color clear to cloudy
- Cloudiness is caused by calcium compounds in the urine. It is recommended to rub the dried calcium deposits between the fingers to determine if deposits are powdery or gritty
- Very young guinea pigs often have an orange or brown tint

*Not Normal:*

- Strong smelling urine: *Possible dehydration or infection*
- Gritty compounds (feels coarse and sandy): *Possible sludge in the bladder*
- Blood in urine: *Possible urinary tract infection, bladder stones, or reproductive problems like pyometra (in females). To check for blood, put some light colored towels on the cage floor.*
- Incontinence (Unable to urinate): *Possible bladder stones*
- NOTE: *Guinea pig's hair should be relatively dry, but if it is constantly wet, there is a possibility of a urinary tract infection.*

## Annual vet visit

Guinea pigs should go to the vet once a year for a well-check. It's important to take them to an exotic vet with experience treating guinea pigs.

## Medication: Prescribed antibiotics by the vet?

If your guinea pig was prescribed antibiotics by the vet, ask your vet about probiotics. Antibiotics can destroy healthy gut bacteria, which can result in abnormally soft stools (or diarrhea). Bene-bac Plus Pet Gel is an easy to administer probiotic designed for pets. Most guinea pigs will immediately latch onto the tube of Bene-bac and take the dispensed dose (1 gram once per day, taken at a different time from the prescribed antibiotics).

## Bloat

Did you know that guinea pigs can die from too much gas building up in their digestive system? Guinea pigs can develop bloat for a variety of reasons, including eating foods that cause gas (e.g., broccoli), not eating, etc. It is a medical emergency if your guinea pig appears swollen and the stomach appears distended. In some cases, there may be no sign other than lethargy and a refusal to eat. In both cases, take your guinea pig to the vet immediately.

*We do not diagnosis and do not recommend diagnosing your guinea pig. If your guinea pig has symptoms suggestive of illness (e.g., running nose, wheezing, bloated / hard belly, lethargy etc.), has lost weight, has begun to refuse foods normally eaten, and/or is not behaving normally, take him to an exotic vet with experience in treating guinea pigs right away. Your guinea pigs' life often depends on you getting veterinary care right away.*

## Guinea Pig Handling

Guinea pigs are gentle animals with delicate bones and sensitive inner organs, nervous by nature and programmed with jumping habits. Take extra care to prevent injuries.

Carrying is not a natural situation for these small animals, so an average new guinea pig is not going to like to be held. Carrying can often induce fear in covies, but in time your pet will probably get used to being carried, but it is also normal for these small animals to struggle to escape if you pick them against their will – even after years of life spent together. Nothing to worry about. Be extra cautious not to squeeze your pet too hard or to accidentally drop it as it struggles.

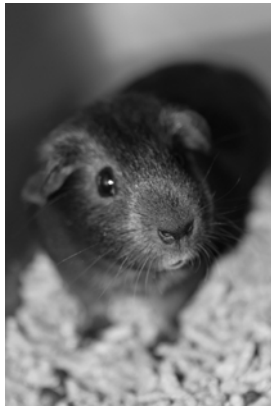
How to pick up your guinea pig:

- Approach guinea pig *from the front*
- Gently *talk* to your pet and *stroke* it on the head
- Place one hand *under your pet's chest* (just behind the front feet) and use your other hand to *support its hindquarters*
- Bring your pet *against your chest* (this position should feel most secure), still supporting it by using two hands
- Keep a firm grip, but do not squeeze (their bones and internal organs are fragile)
- If your pet begins to struggle, lower yourself down to the floor in order to reduce the chance of fall injuries

In order to build a bond between the owner and his pet, it is recommended to handle the guinea pig as often as possible, following these handling instructions. It is recommended to spend sufficient time gently talking to your pet and giving it treats so it learns to trust you, showing less and less fear.

## Normal Behaviors

It is important to learn about your guinea pig behavior in order to recognize its behavioral patterns, unusual behavior, potential needs and moods that your guinea pig is trying to communicate to you. Guinea pigs are inquisitive and curious by nature. They are creatures of habit, so changes in routine like feeding, free time etc., can cause some distress. It is recommended to introduce changes slowly.



### Running Away and Hiding From Being Picked Up

This is a natural defense mechanism which needs to be respected and dealt with patiently. This behavior does not mean your piggy is rejecting you! In time, there is a high probability that all guinea pigs will come to accept being picked up for cuddles and play time out of the cage.

### Begging for food

When hungry or anticipating a treat, your pet will start weeking, and as its confidence grows, it will often stand up on its hind legs (like a dog). Your pig will become very excited and focus its eager eyes in your direction, hoping you'll notice what it wants.

### “Popcorning”

This is normal behavior which consists of hopping up in the air, running around, quickly turning in another direction and repeating the jump. Younger guinea pigs do this when they're happy, excited or feeling playful. Older cavies do not usually jump as high as the young ones (they are heavier), but also tend to popcorn.

### Running laps

Running laps around the cage is a normal behavior for a guinea pig. It does not use exercise wheels, so it has to burn off its energy in other ways.

### Freezing

When a guinea pig senses danger, when it hears a sudden sound that it is unfamiliar with, when it is startled or uncertain about something in its environment, it will freeze and stand motionless. It is a natural reaction used when it tries to make itself seem invisible and lets others in the group know that there could be imminent danger. Freezing is often accompanied by a very short vibrating sound, which also indicates fear.

### Sniffing

Your guinea pig is learning about its surroundings and potential food sources. You may also notice that a guinea pig will occasionally sniff the air with their head stretched out when it is being watchful and curious, wondering what's going on and who is out there.

### Scent markings

To mark items as its property and/or territory, your guinea pig will rub its chins, cheeks, and hind ends on those items. Your pet can also do this outside the cage, usually in the area in which it has regular free range time.

## **Fidgeting (while being held)**

This can be a sign that your pet needs to go to the bathroom, or it is tired of being held. It is recommended that you return your pig to the cage for a moment.

## **Tossing Head Up in the Air**

Your pig will do this when she's getting annoyed with being petted. It's a way of asking you to stop.

## **Licking**

Most people believe that licking is either a sign of affection or simply that your pig likes the taste of salt on your skin.

## **Teeth chattering**

You have probably done something outside the standard operational procedure and seriously angered your guinea pig. Clacking its teeth together is considered as a behavioral pattern of anger. If it is directed at you, your pig is telling you to keep away, so try to respect its wishes or you could be in danger of a bite.

## **Biting**

Biting is considered to be a rare behavioral pattern, but not an unusual one. Guinea pigs can bite you for several reasons:

- If it is upset, angry, frightened, defensive or annoyed.
- Could be the result of an accident; for example, if you've been handling food, guinea pig may make the mistake of thinking your finger is food. It is recommended to wash your hands before handling your guinea pig.
- They may bite because of a skin problem like mites so holding, stroking or touching a guinea pig with mites can cause them severe discomfort and they'll try anything to stop the pain.

## **Nibbling**

Nibbling is a way of communication, especially for young guinea pigs who are still learning and testing their limits. If you've been holding your guinea pig for a while, it may nibble your clothes as a way of communicating to you that it wants/needs to go back to the cage (usually to go to the bathroom).

## **Biting the Cage Bars**

Biting the cage bars can be triggered by several factors:

- When your pet thinks (or assumes) there is a food on the way
- When it is bored and demanding attention
- When living on its own, it will naturally become bored and lonely (even if the owner spends a lot of time with his pet). Consider adopting another guinea pig for company.
- When it is living in a small cage and is not getting sufficient free range time. Consider providing a larger cage and increasing its free range time.

## **Eating its own droppings**

Although it's gross, coprophagia is a normal behavior. It is usually observable when a guinea pig ducks its head underneath followed by munching. The most probable reason for this action is the fact that its droppings represents a source of vitamins B and K, produced by bacteria in the guinea pig's gut.

## **Depression**

Does your guinea pig seem depressed? When your guinea pig is hunched up in a corner, looking sad and depressed, something is probably bothering it. Try offering your guinea pig its favorite food. If it shows no interest, take your guinea pig to the vet immediately, because depression could be an indication to a more serious health problem.

*NOTE: Because of their natural instinct, guinea pigs can hide their illness. In the wild, it is a survival mechanism against predators picking out an easy target.*

## **Scratching**

Like all animals and humans, guinea pigs get the occasional urge to itch. If your pet is scratching excessively, check its skin to see if it is flaky, sore or if any bald patches have appeared.

## **Sleeping**

Guinea pigs do not require sleeping for a long periods as they are not nocturnal animals like hamsters. They need to take small naps during the day and night. Usually, a guinea pig will relax and rest its head on the ground, and some of them will be totally relaxed and spread out their hind legs.

## **Stretching**

A guinea pig will stretch out while yawning at the same time. This is an enjoyable behavior to observe. If your guinea pig is stretching and yawning just after a nap, it is feeling happy and relaxed. One may notice this behavior while holding and cuddling the pet for some time.

## **Cleaning (grooming) itself**

Your guinea pig stands on its hind legs and cleans itself with its front legs licking its fur. It does this when it is by itself, but when certain trust between the pet and its owner is established, it will clean itself next to (or on top of) its owner.

## **Not closing its eyes**

Guinea pigs often do not close their eyes (even when sleeping), unless it is feeling very relaxed (even then it is not very often). This behavior is also the result of a natural defense mechanism and alertness.

## Introducing a New Guinea Pig

### Why do you need more than one guinea pig?

Because guinea pigs are very social animals, it is always recommended that they live with at least one other cage mate. A single guinea pig will get lonely, less curious, vocal and active, regardless of how much time you spend with him or her. It is not natural for them to live without others of their kind.

When living together, guinea pigs will communicate, play and run around more, follow and groom each other, and possibly even sleep cuddled up together.

When choosing cage mates, it is usually best to have the same gender, or different genders but the male must be neutered – because there are lots of abandoned guinea pigs in local animal shelters, and breeding is usually not recommended, because you can save the ones from the shelters.



### Spaying & Neutering

Both spaying and neutering are surgical procedures performed by a veterinarian that render the animal incapable of reproducing. They are mostly done because of the overpopulation of animal shelters – it is better to save the ones which exist then to breed new ones.

If you have the choice, always neuter your male guinea pig because the operation is more complicated for female guinea pigs, but consult with your guinea pig veterinarian for advice.

### Preparations

1. You need to be 100% sure that you know the sex of your guinea pigs. If you are unsure about the gender, ask your veterinarian.
2. Prepare a large enough cage (refer to page 3 for guidance).
3. Prepare separate hiding places and food bowls, so each one can have “his own stuff”.
4. The cage and all the cage accessories should be cleaned using vinegar to remove all previous scents. Rearranging the cage interior is also recommended to remove the existing “personal touch”.
5. Wash your guinea pigs to somewhat hide their natural scent. Or rub the hay from the existing guinea pig’s cage on the newcomer. That way the newbie would somewhat smell like a member of the herd.
6. Your new guinea pig could carry some illnesses which can incubate for a while and spread among your existing cavies. Therefore, it is important to quarantine your new guinea pig for at least two weeks, so potential illnesses would show in time to prevent spreading. Keep the newcomer away from your resident guinea pig(s), and always wash your hands after handling the newcomer.

### Guinea pig matches

The following guinea pig matches are ordered from easiest to potentially troublesome:

1. Two baby guinea pigs
2. Baby guinea pig and an older guinea pig of the same gender

3. Neutered male and one or more females
4. Two females. It is possible that they would not get along – depends on their personalities
5. Two males could live in harmony, but that depends on a specific case – again, on the personality of the guinea pigs in question

## Introduction rules and tips

1. When introducing a new guinea pig, never put your new guinea pig directly in the cage where your old guinea pig is already living.
2. Their first meeting should be done on the large, enclosed “neutral ground” – somewhere outside the cage, in a space that is new to both guinea pigs, like an enclosed area of a kitchen or a bathroom.
3. Place a pile of hay and treats (vegetables) into the center of the area.
4. Place all your guinea pigs into the area.
5. Prepare some towels, in case they start to get physically aggressive.
6. Observe their behavior: ignoring one another is normal. Then, all this could happen: mounting one another, teeth chattering, chasing around, purring accompanied by swaggering walk, etc. It is a natural thing for them – establishing hierarchy, who's the boss, who's the friendly neighbor and who doesn't care. This could take about an hour; after that, you should still observe them for another couple of hours.
7. After the observing period (about 3 hours altogether) they should appear comfortable with each other. You can place them in the cage together.
8. Observe their behavior in the cage for another period of time, just to be sure they are ok.
9. If they don't seem to get along after their time together dedicated on the neutral ground, read further. If they start to get physically aggressive and fight, you will need to throw a towel at the aggressive one and separate one from another.

## What if they don't get along?

It is possible that your guinea pigs won't get along, no matter what you do and how carefully you have read the instructions on this page. Don't be alarmed or disheartened – nature just works in this way.

If this happens, you will need to keep them separated in some way. The best thing to do is to keep them close enough so they could see, smell and talk to each other, but are separated with some kind of a partition. They are still social, and having another guinea pig in their vicinity is quite beneficial.

## Communication

Guinea pigs have a large vocabulary and it can really help you, and your guinea pig if you have a better understanding of what your guinea pig is saying. Here are a few descriptions and sound recordings of noises a guinea pig can make. Many people come up with all kinds of different names to describe a guinea pig sound, chut, chubble, wheeeek, rumble are just a few, but I'm sure once you hear the noise and read the description of why piggy is making the noise, you will soon get to recognise what your guinea pig is saying. Remember some sounds can have more than one meaning or sound similar but you can usually tell the differences as their body language plays a large part in how guinea pigs communicate with us or with each other.

### Wheeking, Squealing or Whistling

- Most popular and known sound made by a guinea pig
- It is a frequently used vocalization, generally communicating *anticipation* and *excitement*, particularly about being fed, or in response to the presence of its owner
- Wheeking is considered to be a form of begging, in some cases mostly heard in the morning and the evening (associated with feeding time)
- Sometimes it serves as a call for attention
- If all the food in the world is provided, and they are still making this (or similar) noise, then maybe they would like to be petted, or released for some free walking time

### Purring

- Purring can be heard when the cavy is happy (e.g. when being petted or held)
- Can be also produced when given food, grooming, or crawling around to investigate a new place

### Chirping

- Possibly the least understood or heard guinea pig sound
- The sound pattern is similar to bird song
- Could be related to stress or when a baby pig wants to be fed

### Rumbling

- Sounds like purring, only lower pitched (deeper) and accompanied with vibrating.
- Response to being scared or angry in which case the rumble often sounds higher and the body vibrates shortly
- Also related to dominance within a group
- Petting in the wrong spots (for instance, on your pet's underside) often results in low rumbling sound

### Whining

- Used to communicate annoyance or dislike for something an owner or another guinea pig is doing
- Can be heard in pursuit situations (both the pursuer and the pursuee)

## Teeth Chattering

- Aggressive vocalization: a sign of an agitated or angry cavy
- This guinea pig sound is made by rapidly gnashing the teeth
- Often accompanied by showing the teeth (looks like a yawn, but more sinister) and raising the head
- Freely interpreted as “back off” or “stay away”

## Shrieking

- A high-pitched noise of discontent, pain and/or fear
- Response to pain or immediate danger
- **URGENT NOTE:** Check on your pet ASAP to make sure everything is okay!

## Coughing

The coughing, choking and sneezing sounds in guinea pigs can happen for several reasons. Some of them are nothing to worry about, because, like sneezing, some coughing is considered normal in guinea pigs. However, if coughing is accompanied with other respiratory problems, or other symptoms of illnesses, or is extremely frequent, then you should take your guinea pig to the vet.

1. Eating and/or drinking **too fast**.
2. A minor irritation in the windpipe; **dust** irritating his/her lungs. Look into what sort of bedding are you using, or perhaps the hay is old and dusty.
3. **URI** (Upper Respiratory Infections). These are very dangerous bacterial infections that can result in death if left untreated. It is usually accompanied with other symptoms, like not eating/drinking.
4. **Obstruction** in the throat. Requires a more detailed vet examination, followed by a possible water rinse.

## Grooming

### Bathing

Guinea pigs ONLY need to be bathed if their fur is caked with urine or another substance. Do not, under any circumstances, submerge a guinea pig when bathing and do not get water in the guinea pig's ears. Hold onto the guinea pig when bathing and wet only the area that needs to be bathed with warm water. In many cases, you may only need to bathe the back end of the guinea pig. You may consider putting water in a small bowl, putting your guinea pig's butt in the water, and propping your guinea pig's front legs on the rim so the guinea pig doesn't get any wetter than necessary. You may also consider using a damp cloth to clean the dirt area. Use a gentle baby shampoo. Rinse and dry your pig thoroughly to avoid chills before returning the guinea pig to his/her home. You may use a hair dryer set to COOL ONLY to help dry your guinea pig.

### Long-fur?

Long fur does not necessitate bathing. However, long-fur requires daily brushing and regular trimming around the guinea pig's skirt (the fur near the rear end) to keep it from getting caked with urine and other debris.

### Nail Trimming

Every few weeks, trim the toenails of your cavy, but be cautious! If you clip too close to the blood vessel the toe nail may start to bleed.