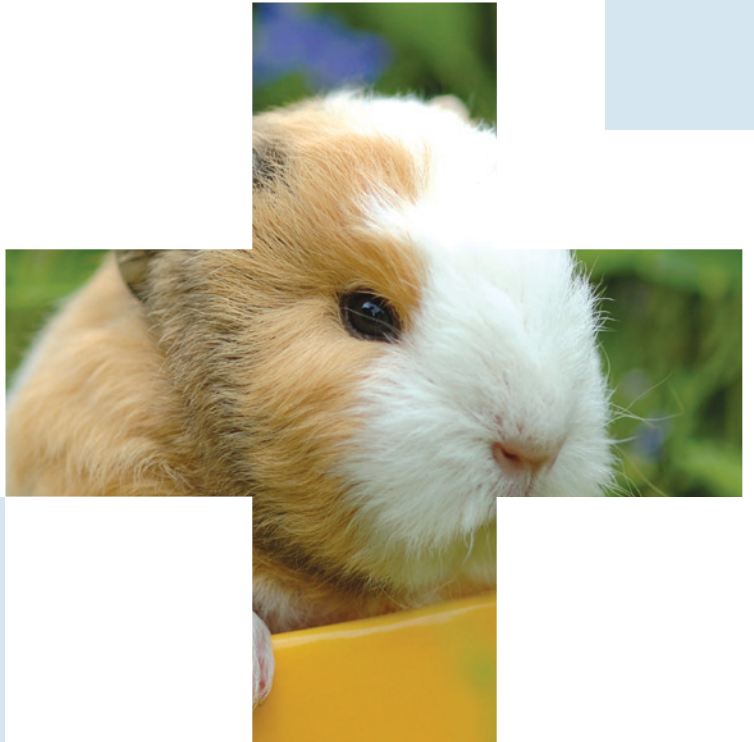


General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Looking after your guinea pig





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Guinea pigs (cavies) originate from South America and make fascinating, intelligent and friendly pets. There are three major varieties: short-haired smooth coated Bolivian, harsh-coated rosetted Abyssinian, long-haired silky coated Peruvian. They communicate through a whole range of high pitched squeaks, chatterings and grunts. On average, they live from four to eight years and are therefore a long term commitment, often outliving a child's interest. Guinea pigs can be obtained from the RSPCA and other rescue centres or reputable breeders and should be at least 6 weeks old before homing.

A number of health problems can be avoided through correct housing and feeding and the following information provides a brief summary about looking after you guinea pig.

Grouping

Guinea pigs are very sociable animals and live in extended family groups in the wild. They need company of their own kind and can be kept in small same sex groups or pairs. Groups of males or a pair of adults that don't know each other may fight so it is best to choose young litter mates of the same sex (two brothers or two sisters), a father and son or a mother and daughter.

It is important to realise that guinea pigs are sexually mature at an early age (females at four to five weeks old and males at eight to nine weeks old) and need to be separated into same sex groups to prevent unwanted pregnancies. If males and females are to be kept together, then the male should be castrated. After castration, the male should be kept separate for approximately four weeks, as it takes this long for him to become sterile.

Guinea pigs should not be kept with rabbits as they can be bullied and injured by them. In addition, rabbits and guinea pigs have quite different feeding requirements.

Housing

Guinea pigs need a weather proof, predator proof hutch raised off the ground and positioned out of direct sunlight and wind. Allow plenty of room i.e. at least 120cm long x 60cm wide x 60cm high for two guinea pigs. In cold weather, the hutch should be moved into a shed or porch but do not place the hutch in a garage where exhaust fumes could be toxic to the guinea pigs. There should be two connecting compartments: one for the day with a wire mesh door and one for night retreat with a solid wall. Guinea pigs like their own separate sleeping compartments.

Ideally, the hutch should be within a secure wire enclosure where the guinea pigs can graze and exercise. Tubes, boxes, logs and flower pots placed in the run provide interesting hiding places for guinea pigs.

Bedding should be soft and dust free e.g. shavings, straw, shredded paper. Soiled bedding should be removed daily and all bedding should be removed before cleaning the hutch once weekly.

Feeding

Guinea pigs are naturally grazing animals so it is important that they have plenty of access to grass and good quality, non dusty hay. The fibre provided by grass and hay is essential to prevent dental disease and to keep the digestive system healthy.

Guinea pigs lack the enzyme required for the production of vitamin C, therefore it is essential that their diet contains enough vitamin C. Growing, pregnant or sick guinea pigs have increased vitamin C requirements. The best sources of vitamin C are fresh vegetables and fruit e.g. dark green leafy vegetables such as spinach, broccoli, kale, cabbage, herbs (e.g. parsley), dandelion leaves, red and green peppers, apples, carrots, tomatoes and even kiwi fruit.

A small amount of dry, concentrated guinea pig-specific food should be fed twice daily. Complete pelleted diets are preferred to coarse mixes to prevent selective feeding which can lead to nutritional deficiencies. Specially formulated guinea pig diets contain additional vitamin C, but they cannot replace the vitamin C provided by fresh vegetables and fruit. Dry food should be kept in an airtight container in a cool, dry, dark place to prevent loss of the vitamin C. It is important not to feed your guinea pig too much dry food as not only will this lead to obesity and its associated problems, but also to a decreased intake of essential grass, hay and fresh food.

Guinea pigs can be selective feeders and set dietary preferences early in life therefore it is important that they receive a diverse diet from an early age.

Don't be surprised to see your guinea pig eating its own faecal pellets or caecotrophs. This is a normal process called coprophagy and optimises nutrient utilisation.

Clean fresh water should always be available; usually from a drip-feed bottle with a metal spout. Natural wood such as willow, beech, hazel and apple provides gnawing opportunities and guinea pigs enjoy searching for food hidden in the run.

Health matters

It is important to check your guinea pig daily for signs of good health. It should be alert, bright eyed, active and interested in food. The coat should be clean and glossy without hair loss or scratching and there should be no discharges from the eyes, nose and mouth. The guinea pig's breathing should be quiet and regular.

Don't forget to check that your guinea pig's bottom is clean, as fly strike can be a rapidly developing problem particularly in long-haired breeds. Fly strike occurs when flies lay eggs in faeces covered hair. These hatch and the maggots burrow into the body.

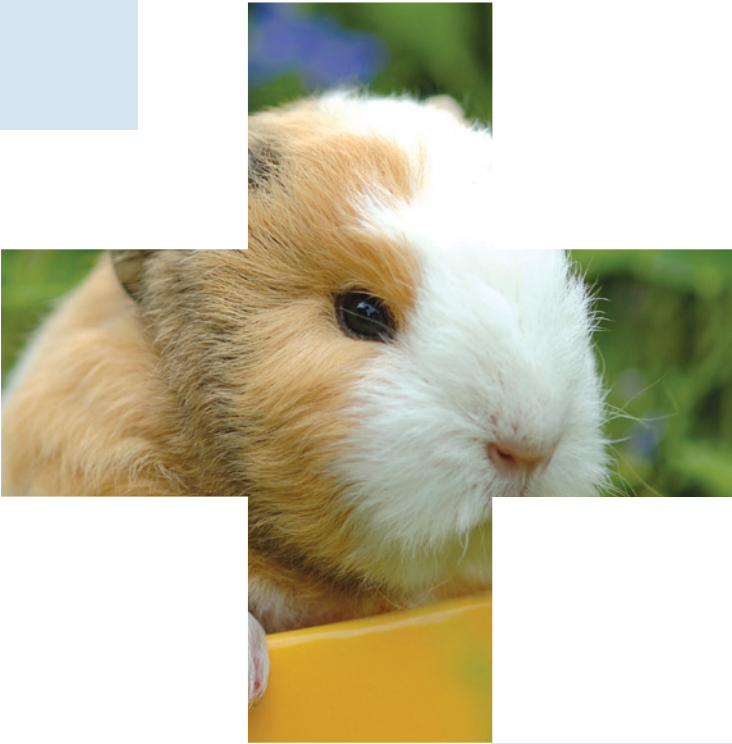
Grooming is important especially with long-haired breeds and nails and teeth should be checked regularly to ensure that they don't become overgrown.

Common health problems in guinea pigs include:

- Dental disease – usually due to lack of fibre
- Mange / mites
- Ringworm
- Lice
- Bumble foot / ulcerated feet caused by poor living conditions
- Eye problems
- Fly strike
- Scurvy due to lack of vitamin C
- Respiratory infections
- Diarrhoea

If you have any concerns about your guinea pig, then please [contact us](#) for advice.

General Practice Service
www.willows.uk.net



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