

Guinea Pigs (Cavies)

About Your Guinea Pig

Guinea Pigs (cavies) generally live five to eight years. Males and females make equally good pets. Some veterinarians will neuter male guinea pigs but the ARL does not.

Items Needed

Make sure you have the following items for your guinea pig:

- Cage – 7.5 square feet per cavy, or about 30" x 36", is the bare minimum recommended
- Bedding
- Bottle brush
- Nail clippers
- Styptic pencil

Housing

- Cavies need a cage that is easily cleaned, safe, and has good ventilation.
- Two or more cavies of the same sex can be kept in a cage together. A cage of at least 10.5 square feet (30" x 50") is recommended for two cavies.
- You should not use a cage with a wire bottom unless it has a tray over the wires or is well padded with hay. A cavy should not live standing or laying on wire. The risk of a young cavy breaking or catching a leg is increased with improper housing.
- Area needs to be well-lit. Do not leave a cavy's cage in an area where direct sunlight hits the cage unless there is adequate shaded space available. Ambient temperature should not exceed 80°.
- Cavies do sunbathe, but excessive heat will kill them.
- Do not leave your cavy loose without supervision.
- Appropriate bedding ranges from recycled paper bedding, newspapers, pelleted newspaper, and quality pine shavings and slivers of wood; aspen curls are excellent. Cedar should not be used as it contains more volatile oils than most woods and can cause respiratory problems. Corncob products can be used; however, they can be rough on the animal's feet and can lead to a problem called "bumblefoot."
- Cages should be cleaned every three to seven days. If you smell ammonia, cage cleaning is overdue.

Appropriate Accessories

- Cavies prefer water bottles that hang from their cage walls. Never use glass bottles.
- Make sure water bottles have the ball-valve-type sipper tubes. Cavies love to play with the tips and spit into them. Clean the bottle daily or every other day. Brush the sipper tube when cleaning and use a bottle brush.
- Food can be offered in bowls, ceramic crocks, and hanging wire-type feeders. Do not use plastic feeders, as cavies love to chew plastic. They will eat food bowls and stacking tubs.
- Keep food bowls in the middle of the cage rather than in a corner to help prevent cavies from using them for elimination.

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Feeding

Guinea pig pellets will provide your guinea pig with the proper balance of vitamins (save for Vitamin C), minerals, and other nutrients. One thing that should be noted before we move on: guinea pigs should be fed guinea pig pellets, not rabbit pellets or pellets for another species of animal. Guinea pig pellets are nutritionally balanced for guinea pigs, and feeding them pellets for other animals can result in serious health problems. Though some people may tell you that their guinea pigs survive well on rabbit pellets, for instance, you should not trust that all rabbit food is safe for guinea pigs. Their particular brand may work for guinea pigs, but another brand may lack necessary vitamins or minerals, or have them in insufficient or excessive quantities. There is no regulation in the pet food industry, so pellets and feeds vary considerably between manufacturers. Don't play Russian roulette with your cavies: only feed them pellets that are explicitly and exclusively for guinea pigs.

Although it's not necessary to feed pellets to your guinea pigs, it is certainly recommended that they be your primary feed, after hay. Guinea pig pellets are, in particular, a prime source of protein; obtaining the necessary amounts of this and other nutrients will require careful dietary planning if you choose not to use pellets.

As a general rule of thumb, adult guinea pigs will eat between one and two ounces of pellets each day. More active animals will eat less, and animals without much stimulation will eat more out of boredom. Nursing and pregnant sows may demand a little more than this, and animals that are given plenty of hay and some fresh vegetables each day might eat a little less. It will be easy to tell if you are feeding too much or too little: if there are leftover pellets, then you are giving them too much. If the bowl is empty and they seem to be foraging for food, then you aren't feeding them enough. Through trial-and-error, you will know exactly how much to give them at feeding time.

Try to feed at the same hour each day (or hours, if you opt to feed twice a day), as guinea pigs like a routine and predictable life. Remove any leftover pellets after an hour or so; if you let them stay in the cage all day, your guinea pigs may nibble on them all day long. As was mentioned above, guinea pig pellets are a prime source of protein: a diet that is heavy on pellets will lead to a fat guinea pig, so you only want them eating pellets at meal times.

When choosing your pellets, be sure to avoid the guinea pig "mixes" that contain nuts, seeds and dried fruits. These mixes are high in fats and oils, which can lead to excessive weight gain. Additionally, many of these mixes contain sunflower seeds in their shells. Guinea pigs should never be fed nuts or seeds that are still in their shells (peanuts, sunflower seeds, etc.): dozens of guinea pigs in the Pacific Northwest alone die each year from choking on these shell fragments.

Hay is the only food that cavies should have access to 24 hours a day. Cavies have long intestinal tracts and need bulk in their diet. It is important to provide them with timothy hay at all times. The hay will also help with keeping their teeth worn down.

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Fresh vegetables generally provide necessary vitamins and minerals. Cavies can eat their weight in fresh vegetables and fruits, but the first time you offer something they may ignore it. Offer an item two or three days in a row. Cavies have very definite likes and dislikes. They resist changing food and have been known to nearly starve because the food in the bowl was “bad” for whatever reason. If a cavy refuses food, throw it away and get new, fresh food – preferably a different kind.

One cavy may love apples, another won't touch them. Most cavies will eat watermelon, fresh grass, hay and banana leaves the first time they are offered. Most love carrots, parsley, kale, corn on the cob, pears, cantaloupe, peaches, sweet potatoes, cilantro, beets (but not the tops), Swiss chard, spinach, tomatoes (but never any of the green plant parts), green beans, cucumbers and more. Never feed rotting or moldy foodstuffs. If it is good enough for you to eat, it's OK for your cavy. Never feed a cavy foods that are high in salt or sugar such as candy, potato chips and other junk foods as well as dairy products.

Vitamins

Vitamins are optional, except for vitamin C. Cavies must have a daily added source of vitamin C. Lack of vitamin C causes scurvy, a very painful, totally preventable disease. Always keep vitamin C cool and dry, and do not contaminate it with chlorinated water. A good way to supplement a cavy's diet with vitamin C is to offer citrus fruits such as orange periodically.

Items to Avoid

Beware of houseplants. If they are within the cavy's reach, they will be eaten. If it is green and growing, they consider it theirs. Some houseplants – such as cacti, poinsettias, palms, lilies and other bulb plants are poisonous.