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Frequently Asked Guinea Pig Questions

Congratulations on the arrival of your new guinea pig! The doctors and staff of Glenway Animal Hospital are committed to making sure that your newest family member lives a long, happy, and healthy life. To help you and your guinea pig to start out on the right foot (and paw ☺) we've put together a list of some frequently asked questions and their corresponding answers. This list is not all-inclusive so if you have additional questions please don't hesitate to contact us!

What should I feed my guinea pig?

Good quality food and fresh, clean water must be readily available at all times. Carefully select commercial pellets that contain all of the essential nutrients required by guinea pigs. The pellets should contain 18-20% protein, 16% fiber, and approximately 1 gram of vitamin C per kilogram of feed. **DO NOT** feed your guinea pig rabbit pellets or pellet mixtures that contain corn, nuts, seeds or colored "poofies". Guinea pigs require a high level of folic acid and vitamin C so their pellets are uniquely formulated to fill these requirements. Our favorite food brand is Oxbow's Cavy Cuisine.

Guinea pigs cannot manufacture their own vitamin C, so they must receive it from outside sources. Although most Guinea pig pellets are supplemented with vitamins, even when properly stored in a cool, dry place, fresh pellets lose about half of the vitamin C content within 6 weeks of manufacturing. For the safety of your guinea pig provide a vitamin C supplement. You can

offer your guinea pig a piece of fresh kale, cabbage or other dark leafy greens high in ascorbic acid. A slice of orange or other fresh fruit can be given as a vitamin-filled treat. Fresh fruit can be offered daily, but should make up less than 10% of their daily food consumed. Fresh foods should be washed thoroughly to remove any pesticide residues or bacterial contamination. Dried fruits can cause choke and bloat and should not be given. The Oxbow Hay Company makes a great tasty vitamin C supplement tablet (GTN-50C) that guinea pigs love.

Guinea pigs' gastrointestinal tract needs a lot of fiber to maintain optimal health so fresh hay must be given daily. Offer your guinea pig a selection of grass hay including: timothy, oat, orchard grass, or brome hay. Alfalfa is a legume hay which contains higher protein and calcium levels than its grass hay equivalents. Growing pigs can be given alfalfa hay and/or pellets but adults (> 8 months) can develop life-threatening bladder stones if fed too much calcium. Hay also maintains proper tooth wear, preventing malocclusion problems. In addition it includes microorganism needed for gastrointestinal health.

Guinea pigs tend to be creatures of habit so they don't tolerate changes in the presentation of their food, water, taste, texture, odor or form of the food. Any changes should be made slowly to avoid having your pet refuse food and/or water. Reluctance to eat and drink can lead to gastrointestinal ileus or stasis (the bowels stop moving). This can be fatal if left untreated.

All food should be offered in a heavy ceramic crock that won't tip over. The sides of the bowl need to be high enough so bedding or feces won't get into the bowl and low enough so the guinea pig can easily access the food. Water is commonly offered using a water bottle equipped with a 'sipper' tube. Guinea pigs tend to contaminate and clog their water bottles by chewing on the end of the sipper tube and "backwashing" food particles into it. For this reason, it is important that all food and water containers be cleaned and disinfected daily.

Where should I house my guinea pig?

Appropriate housing is critical in maintaining a healthy pet. Guinea pigs are more comfortable and relaxed when housed in a quiet spot away from noise, excitement, and other stresses. Select a location away from direct sunlight,

with good ventilation, and avoid damp areas. Drastic environmental changes need to be avoided. Guinea pigs are crepuscular (rather than nocturnal, they are most active at dawn and dusk) and require a quiet period with low light in order to rest.

Guinea pigs can be housed within enclosures made of wire or durable plastic. Wood cages should be avoided because they are difficult to clean and sanitize and are susceptible to destructive chewing. At least one side of the cage should be open ; therefore aquariums are not suitable. Examine cages for potential hazards, escape routes, or sharp edges every time you clean. Guinea pigs need about 100 square inches of floor space per adult guinea pig allowing for normal play and activity. As with other living arrangements the more space the better for your Guinea pig's quality of life.

Solid cage floors are preferred. They may require a bit more effort to keep clean, but are better for your pig's health. Wire cage bottoms predispose pigs to sore hocks, torn toenails, and even broken legs. If a wire cage is used, part of the floor must be covered with a solid surface like cardboard or thick newspaper so the pig's feet do not get sore.

Guinea pigs enjoy having a dark, quiet place to rest. Many versions of hideaway huts are available commercially, but a cardboard box works well too, is inexpensive and doubles as a chew toy. Other chew toys such as non-toxic twigs and branches, and untreated wood can be rotated for their continued chewing pleasure and dental health

What type of bedding should I use for my guinea pig?

Bedding materials must be clean, nontoxic, absorbent, relatively dust free, and easy to replace. Acceptable bedding includes wood shavings, shredded paper, news paper or commercial pellets (examples are Carefresh, Ecostraw or Yesterdays News). **DO NOT** use cedar shavings, as they are often implicated in causing respiratory and liver disease. Saw dust can also cause problems and should not be used,

How should I handle my guinea pig?

A guinea pigs' natural curiosity and friendly disposition make them fairly easy to handle. Most pigs will allow you to scoop them into the palm of your hand directly from their cage; some may wish to exit by themselves via a

ramp or tunnel. When carrying a pig, hold him/her close to your body with one hand under them and one on their back. Most pigs dislike being held on their backs.

When should my guinea pig see a veterinarian?

Your guinea pig should have a full physical examination by a veterinarian familiar with this species at least every six months to detect subtle problems such as malocclusion, skin, eye, and ear abnormalities, or change in weight. A fecal specimen should be checked as well to detect for intestinal parasites. Your guinea pig should be taken to your veterinarian if you notice any changes in behavior, bathroom habits, anorexia, abnormal swelling, abnormal discharge, ruffed fur, inactivity or limping. As prey animals they will often hide disease states until they are quite ill, so it is important to know what is normal for your pig so you can detect abnormalities and treat them quickly.

Does my guinea pig need a friend?

Because they are friendly creatures, Guinea Pigs usually enjoy the company of a friend of its own kind. You must decide if you have the room and financial means to properly care for more than one pet before you take the plunge. There are usually an abundance of Guinea Pigs listed on pet welfare/adoption websites (our favorite local site is www.thislittlepiggy.org and you can find others listed on www.petfinder.com) where you can take your pig to pick out his/her own friend. Slow and supervised introductions are needed before putting 2 pigs together. DO NOT place a female and male together if the female is over 6 months because she won't be able to deliver the offspring.

What should I do in case of emergency?

Glenway Animal Hospital is open 7 am to 6 pm every weekday and from 8 am to 12 noon on select Saturdays. During those hours if Dr. Dornbusch Cron or Dr. Naas are not on duty the staff can refer you to other area practices that see guinea pigs. For after hour care see our emergency options handout. Emergency situations include refusal to eat or drink (this can become very serious quickly), bleeding, difficulty breathing, sudden or abnormal swelling (anywhere), abdominal distension, any sign of acute pain or distress (vocalization, hunching, straining to urinate or defecate, etc).

How long can I expect my guinea pig to live?

The average lifespan of a guinea pig is 5-6 years. There is a lot of individual as well as breed variation, but a good quality diet and preventative medicine and care can help your guinea pig live its life to the fullest potential.

For more information:

www.thislittlepiggy.org Local guinea pig rescue and education organization

www.cavyspirit.com General information and adoptions

www.oxbowhay.com Premium hay, pellets, treats & supplements, information

www.guineapigcages.com great ideas

www.guinealynx.com Good source of medical information about your pig

www.guineapigs.info General information and adoptions

www.veterinarypartner.com a website run by veterinarians

Fun guinea pig facts

Guinea pigs are native to the Andes Mountains. In some areas of South America, they are raised as a food source.

Male guinea pigs weigh around 900 to 1200 grams and females weigh 700 to 900 grams.

When guinea pigs are excited they may circle or stampede. When they hear an unfamiliar sound they freeze.

Guinea pigs are born fully furred, with their eyes open. While they still need their mother's milk for at least 7 days to develop good immunity, they are pretty self-sufficient, eat what mom eats after the second day of life.

It is very difficult to determine which sex guinea pigs less than 3 weeks of age.

Some Guinea Pigs enjoy being bathed. Some don't. It is usually not necessary to bathe your pig unless he/she gets into something sticky.