



Care of Pet Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs can be wonderful pets for many different situations. They are easy to care for and have few needs besides proper caging, nutrition and loving attention. There are several varieties of guinea pigs available. The English or Shorthair variety and the Abyssinian are the most common and the Peruvian variety has hair that grows up to 6" in length. They live an average of 3 to 6 years of age and are usually 1 to 2 pounds in weight. They rarely bite or scratch and can be housed together in many instances.

Nutrition

Proper nutrition is the key to a long and healthy life for the pet guinea pig. They should be fed a fresh source of guinea pig pellets containing at least 18-20% protein, 4% fat and 16% fiber. Do not abruptly change food on the guinea pig because they can be very finicky and will go off their food for an unspecified period of time and develop serious problems. Try to stick with the same brand of pellets and if changes become necessary, do so very gradually. Fresh water should be supplied daily as guinea pigs are known to chew on sipper tubes and clog them with food. All guinea pigs require a daily source of Vitamin C as they, unlike cats and dogs, cannot manufacture it themselves. The daily requirement is approximately 20 mg per guinea pig. This can be supplied with citrus fruits, orange juice, fresh cabbage, kale or carrots. We recommend 1/2 cup cabbage or kale or 1/4 of an orange. Alternatively, 50-100 mg of a human Vitamin C tablet per cup of drinking water may be supplied. If the guinea pig doesn't get the proper amount of Vitamin C, it can develop scurvy and other life-threatening problems. It is also important to supply free choice grass hay to help prevent digestive disturbances.

Housing

Guinea pigs can be housed in many different cage types. Be sure the cage can be easily cleaned and do so at least weekly. Avoid wire bottomed cages as they can damage a guinea pig's tender feet. Since they cannot easily climb or jump, they can be in an open topped cage as long as there are no "predator-type" fellow pets in the household. Wood shavings are the recommended bedding type. Avoid cedar chips as they may contain toxic oils.

Reproduction

Guinea pigs can reproduce as early as 3 months of age. If a female is to have a planned pregnancy she ideally should be bred at 5 months of age because her pelvic canal will fuse as she attains adulthood and may have a difficult birth. Many guinea pigs have required a Cesarean section to save the mother and the offspring. The guinea pigs have a gestation time of 58-72 days and an average 3-4 offspring. The newborns are fully haired, have open eyes and erupted teeth. The mother only has two mammary glands but usually has no problem rearing an average litter. The young should be offered solid food at 2-3 days of age but should be allowed to nurse for 2-3 weeks before weaning.

Diseases

Guinea pigs are susceptible to many diseases and if your guinea pig shows signs of illness, it should be seen by a veterinarian. Among the most common diseases are problems with overgrown teeth, decreased appetite, skin disorders, Vitamin C deficiency, Salmonella infections (from contaminated fresh foods), upper respiratory disorders, abscessed lymph nodes and intestinal impactions. Watch for changes in the guinea pig's fecal pellets, appetite, weight and general body condition. The earlier the symptoms are brought to your veterinarian's attention, the better chance your pet has for a successful recovery.

One final important characteristic of the guinea pig is its unique toxic reaction to certain antibiotics. The guinea pig can develop severe intestinal and blood infections due to its inability to control the antibiotic in its system. Do not try home remedies in the hopes of curing the guinea pig because they could be lethal. If your pet develops a bacterial infection that requires antibiotics, your veterinarian will select a medication that should not harm your pet.



With proper care and nutrition, your pet guinea pig should remain healthy and happy for a long time.