EDUCATION

How To Look After A Guinea Pig Guide

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Introduction: Why a Guinea Pig Makes a Wonderful Pet

Bringing a guinea pig into your home is a decision filled with excitement and responsibility. These gentle, sociable rodents, also known as cavies, have captured the hearts of families, singles, and seniors alike with their charming squeaks, curious personalities, and relatively manageable care requirements. Unlike hamsters or gerbils, guinea pigs are diurnal, meaning they are active during the day, which makes them ideal companions for those who want to interact with their pet during waking hours. However, owning a guinea pig is not a decision to be taken lightly. These little animals can live for five to seven years, sometimes longer, and they demand a consistent, informed approach to their wellbeing.

If you have recently adopted a guinea pig or are considering one as a new family member, you need a reliable roadmap. This **How To Look After A Guinea Pig Guide** will walk you through every essential aspect of cavy care, from setting up the perfect habitat to understanding their dietary needs, social requirements, and health maintenance. By following these best practices, you will ensure your furry friend lives a happy, healthy, and enriched life.

Understanding Guinea Pig Behaviour and Needs

Before diving into the practicalities, it is vital to understand what makes guinea pigs tick. They are prey animals, which means their instincts are geared toward caution and safety. A guinea pig that feels threatened will freeze, hide, or flee. As a caretaker, your job is to create a predictable, safe environment where your pet can thrive. Guinea pigs are also highly social creatures. In the wild, they live in herds, and this social structure is deeply ingrained. A solitary guinea pig can become lonely, depressed, and even physically ill. Therefore, one of the first decisions you will make is whether to adopt a pair or a small group rather than a single animal. Most experts strongly recommend keeping at least two guinea pigs together, preferably of the same sex to avoid unwanted litters.

Signs of a Happy Guinea Pig

A content guinea pig will exhibit behaviours such as **popcorning** (joyful little jumps and twists), gentle purring sounds when being petted, and a healthy appetite. They will also be curious about their surroundings and willing to explore. Conversely, a stressed or unwell guinea pig may sit hunched, show reduced activity, grind its teeth (a sign of pain), or refuse food. Learning to read these cues is fundamental to good care.

Setting Up the Ideal Guinea Pig Habitat

The cornerstone of good guinea pig care is a spacious, clean, and well-equipped enclosure. Many new owners make the mistake of purchasing a cage that is far too small. Pet store cages marketed for guinea pigs are often inadequate. A single guinea pig requires a minimum of 7.5 square feet of floor space, but bigger is always better. For two guinea pigs, aim for at least 10.5 square feet.

Choosing the Right Cage Type

The most popular and practical option for guinea pig owners is the **CC (cube and coroplast) cage**, also known as a C&C cage. These are modular grids that can be configured to any size, with a solid coroplast base that is easy to clean. They offer excellent ventilation and plenty of space. Traditional wire-bottom cages are not recommended because they can injure guinea pigs' delicate feet. A solid floor is essential. **Fleece bedding**has become a favourite among experienced owners. It is soft, absorbent, reusable, and gentle on feet. You will need to spot-clean daily and do a full laundry change every few days. Alternatively, paper-based bedding is a good, dust-free option. Avoid cedar or pine shavings, as the aromatic oils can cause respiratory problems.

Essential Cage Accessories

Your guinea pig's home should include the following:

- Hideys: At least one per guinea pig. These can be wooden houses, fleece tunnels, or plastic igloos. They provide a safe retreat.
- Food bowls: Heavy ceramic bowls are best as they are difficult to tip over and are easy to clean.
- Water bottle: A drip-proof water bottle attached to the side of the cage is preferable to a bowl, as it keeps the water clean and prevents bedding from getting wet.
- Hay rack: This keeps hay off the floor and reduces waste.
- Litter tray: Many guinea pigs can be partially litter trained, especially if you place a small tray with paper bedding in the corner they favour as a toilet.

The cage should be placed in a quiet, draft-free area away from direct sunlight, heating vents, and loud noises like televisions or barking dogs. Guinea pigs are sensitive to temperature extremes, so keep the room between 18 and 24 degrees Celsius.

Nutrition: Feeding Your Guinea Pig a Balanced Diet

Guinea pigs have very specific dietary requirements that set them apart from other small mammals. The most critical fact to remember is that, like humans, guinea pigs cannot synthesise their own vitamin C. They must obtain it from their diet every single day. A deficiency can lead to scurvy, a serious and often fatal condition. This is non-negotiable.

The Core Components of a Guinea Pig Diet

Unlimited Timothy hay (or grass hay) should make up about 80% of your guinea pig's diet. Hay is essential for dental health, as guinea pigs' teeth grow continuously and need to be worn down by chewing. It also supports healthy digestion. Alfalfa hay is too high in calcium and protein for adult guinea pigs and should only be given to pregnant or very young animals.

High-quality guinea pig pelletsshould be offered in limited quantities. A good rule of thumb is about one-eighth of a cup per guinea pig per day. Look for pellets that are fortified with vitamin C and contain no seeds, nuts, or dried fruit, which are fatty and sugary. Avoid muesli-style mixes, as guinea pigs tend to pick out the tasty bits and leave the nutritious pellets, leading to an unbalanced diet.

Fresh vegetablesare a vital source of vitamin C and hydration. Offer a variety of leafy greens and vegetables daily. Excellent choices include:

- Bell peppers (red and yellow are highest in vitamin C)
- Romaine lettuce (not iceberg, which has little nutritional value)
- Corriander (cilantro)
- Kale (in moderation due to calcium content)
- Carrots (as a treat, due to sugar content)
- Cucumber

- Zucchini

Aim for about one cup of vegetables per guinea pig per day, divided into two servings. Introduce new vegetables slowly to avoid digestive upset.

Fruits and Treats

Fruits are high in sugar and should be given sparingly. A small slice of apple, a few blueberries, or a strawberry once or twice a week is plenty. Avoid citrus fruits in large quantities, as they can be acidic. Always remove any uneaten fresh food after a few hours to prevent spoilage and bacterial growth.

Socialisation and Companionship

As mentioned earlier, guinea pigs are herd animals. Keeping them in pairs or trios is not just a recommendation; it is a core welfare requirement in many countries. A lone guinea pig can suffer from loneliness, stress, and depression, which can weaken the immune system. The most common and successful pairing is two females, two males, or a neutered male with one or more females. Male-male pairs can work well if they are introduced as babies or have enough space, though some may eventually fall out. Neutering a male is a routine procedure and allows you to keep him with females without the risk of pregnancy.

Introducing New Guinea Pigs

If you are adding a new guinea pig to an existing one, you must follow a proper introduction process. Never simply place a stranger into an established territory. Start with a neutral space, such as a clean playpen or a freshly washed cage with all new bedding. Allow them to meet with plenty of hiding spots available. Supervise closely for signs of aggression like teeth chattering, lunging, or fur-raising. Some chasing and rumbling is normal as they establish hierarchy. If they settle down and show relaxed behaviours such as sniffing, grooming, or lying down near each other, the introduction is going well. The process can take a few days or a few weeks. Patience is key.

Exercise, Enrichment, and Handling

Guinea pigs need daily exercise outside their cage to stay fit, stimulated, and happy. A secure, enclosed playpen or a guinea-pig-proofed room is ideal. Ensure there are no electrical cords, toxic plants, or small gaps where they could get stuck. Floor time should last at least one hour per day, though more is always appreciated. During this time, provide tunnels, cardboard boxes, paper bags, and safe toys to encourage exploration.

How to Handle a Guinea Pig Safely

Proper handling is crucial for building trust and preventing injury. Guinea pigs have fragile spines, so they must always be supported securely. To pick up your guinea pig, approach calmly and place one hand under its chest behind the front legs and the other hand under its hindquarters to support its full weight. Lift gently and hold it close to your body. Never grab a guinea pig from above, as this mimics a predator attack. Children should always be supervised when handling guinea pigs, and they should be taught to sit on the floor rather than stand while holding the animal to reduce the risk of a fall.

Tummy timeis a great bonding activity. Sit on the floor with your guinea pig on your lap, offer a few pieces of vegetable, and let it explore you at its own pace. With consistent, gentle interaction, your guinea pig will learn to trust you and may even come to you when called.

Health Care and Grooming

Guinea pigs are generally hardy animals, but they are prone to specific health issues. Being a responsible owner means being proactive about their health.

Common Health Problems

- Vitamin C deficiency (scurvy): Symptoms include lethargy, rough coat, swollen joints, and reluctance to move. Prevent this by providing fresh vegetables daily. If you are concerned, supplement with liquid vitamin C designed for guinea pigs (never add it to the water bottle as it degrades quickly).
- Respiratory infections: Runny eyes or nose, sneezing, and laboured breathing are signs of a URI. Guinea pigs are very susceptible to pneumonia, so prompt veterinary care is essential.
- Dental problems: Overgrown teeth, drooling, and difficulty eating indicate a dental issue. Hay is the best preventative.
- Bloat and GI stasis: This is a serious condition where the digestive system slows down or stops. It can be caused by stress, poor diet, or illness. Immediate vet attention is needed.
- Pododermatitis (bumblefoot): Sores on the feet caused by dirty or wire flooring. Keep cages clean and provide soft bedding.

Find an exotic animal veterinarian before you need one. Guinea pigs are not typical cats and dogs, and many general vets lack experience with them. Establish a relationship with a vet who treats guinea pigs and schedule a wellness check soon after adoption.

Grooming Needs

Grooming is not just about appearance; it is a health necessity. Short-haired guinea pigs need occasional brushing to remove loose hair and prevent matting. Long-haired breeds, such as Peruvians or Shelties, require daily brushing to prevent painful tangles and mats that can trap urine and cause skin infections. **Nail trimming** is essential every two to four weeks. Use small animal nail clippers and be careful not to cut the quick (the blood vessel inside the nail). If you are unsure, ask your vet to show you the technique or have them do it. Bathing is rarely needed; only if the guinea pig is very dirty or for medical reasons. Use a shampoo formulated for small animals and keep the bath brief to avoid stress and chilling.

Additional Considerations for a Long, Happy Life

Beyond the basics, there are a few more things that make a significant difference to your guinea pig's quality of life.

Temperature and Environment

Guinea pigs are very sensitive to heat. They cannot sweat and are prone to heatstroke at temperatures above 28°C (

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