

# Guinea pig care guide



**woodgreen**

Helping pets and their people

# Introduction to guinea pigs

Thinking about getting a guinea pig? In this handy guide, you'll find out everything there is to know about keeping them happy and healthy. And once you're an 'expert' on this spectacular species, you'll know for sure if guinea pigs are the right pet for you.

These charming, lovable, little animals can make perfect pets for most families. They'll bring you lots of joy and fill your home with endless, adorable squeaks. Just like saying "walkies" to a dog, the rustle of a plastic bag can send them into a frenzy!

## Furry facts

**Male name:** Boar.

**Female name:** Sow.

**Life expectancy:** Six to eight years plus.

**Companionship:** Guinea pigs need to be housed as a pair or more.

**Accommodation:** They can live indoors or outdoors.

**Diet:** As herbivores, their diet needs to be 85% hay/grass, 5% pellets, 10% vegetables and safe plants, with access to fresh drinking water round the clock.

**Health:** They need their nails to be trimmed regularly and their teeth must be monitored for dental disease.

**Family friendly:** Guinea pigs can make lovely pets for all the family. Slightly older guinea pigs are often more suited to families with younger children. This is because they are larger and more relaxed about being handled and interacted with.

# Accommodation

Although guinea pigs are small creatures, they need plenty of space to run around to their heart's content. This will help keep them active, healthy and happy. For males, it's best to give them as much room as possible, otherwise they tend to squabble!

**Ideal size requirements for a pair of female guinea pigs or a female and neutered male pair:**

**Hutch or indoor cage**

– 5ft by 2ft (153cm by 61cm), single tier.

**Run for the garden** – 6ft long

by 4ft wide by 18 inches high (182cm by 121cm), wooden framed run with a removable/hinged lid.

**Ideal size requirements for a pair of male guinea pigs, or a trio of guinea pigs:**

**Hutch or indoor cage**

– 6ft by 2ft (182cm by 61cm), single tier.

**Run for the garden** – 6ft long by 4ft wide by 18 inches high (182cm by 121cm) wooden framed run with a removable/hinged lid.

**Groups of four or more guinea pigs will need a larger indoor setup or a converted shed/Wendy House, along with a bigger run for the garden.**

**If you'd like more information about this, don't hesitate to contact our friendly team!**



**Guinea pigs can live indoors or outdoors – and there are pros and cons to consider with both options.**

Indoor pros	Outdoor pros
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your guinea pigs are likely to become more confident around you and being hand-fed.</li> <li>• You're more likely to spot health concerns. In fact, these may even be reduced as they'll be in a dry, warm environment with a reduced risk of fungal and respiratory issues.</li> <li>• They'll be safe from wild predators and bad weather.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They'll have a larger living area if you use a Wendy House or shed.</li> <li>• A calmer, quieter area away from household noises and other pets such as dogs and cats is beneficial to their well-being.</li> <li>• It's easier to allow them to graze throughout the year, as they'll be more acclimatised to the weather.</li> <li>• It's safer if anyone in your home suffers from allergies.</li> </ul>
Indoor cons	Outdoor cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It may be tricky to find a peaceful room that gives your guinea pigs the quiet time they need.</li> <li>• If you have cats or dogs, they're more likely to watch the guinea pigs and cause them stress.</li> <li>• They'll have less opportunities to graze on grass. If they're given this option from time to time, they'll need time to acclimatise to the outside temperatures.</li> <li>• You may be allergic to their bedding, and this is no fun at all!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There's less opportunity to socialise with your guinea pigs.</li> <li>• They're more likely to have health issues that go unnoticed for longer periods.</li> <li>• They'll be at risk of wild predators such as foxes, stoats and rats if their enclosure isn't secure.</li> <li>• The weather can be an issue – there's a risk of them becoming cold and damp during the winter and overheating during the summer.</li> </ul>

## Indoor housing

Although cages can come in various sizes, many of them are quite small and not suitable for a pair of guinea pigs. A lack of space can also make it tricky to be creative with their environment.

Look out for modular cage ranges like those offered by C&C. They're more flexible and more suited to empty spaces in your home. Plus they're usually more affordable and easy to make. But due to their open top design, they're not suited to homes with cats, dogs or young children.

### Where to place your cage

Guinea pigs are a prey species and are easily scared by loud noises. So avoid placing them in busy, noisy rooms like the living room, kitchen or a play room. Keep their enclosure away from any draughts throughout the year and hot sunny windows in the summer.



# Outdoor housing



## Hutches

There are many single level hutches available in pet stores and online. But many are very poorly made and often fall apart within the first two years. So consider investing a little more, if you can, with a welfare approved hutch company and get yourself a hutch which is made of strong wood. Your hutch should also have suitable bolts on the doors – cunning predators can easily open hutches with swivel latches.

## Don't make a wheel decision when it comes to accommodation

Double level hutches are not ideal for guinea pigs. Although some will use both levels, most

only end up using one, as the ramps are usually quite steep and provide little grip, if any at all. They're also at risk of falling down the ramp or floor hole when they're elderly and less mobile. Chicken coops or plastic pods are also not suitable for guinea pigs. The housing area is often very small, can become damp and mouldy. It also offers limited space if the run area is too wet.

## Winter

If you go with the hutch option, it's wise to consider what you'll do during the winter months. Many hutches now come with ventilated covers, allowing the hutch to be outside all year round. The best protection will come from placing

the hutch inside a shed or well ventilated outbuilding with natural daylight. This will help to keep them warm and safe from predators.

## Sheds and Wendy Houses

Wendy Houses or garden sheds make an ideal home for your guinea pigs, especially if you have a herd. Sheds can easily be converted with mesh doors to provide good ventilation, and a step over barrier to stop them escaping. A shed also offers more floor space for the guinea pigs, which means more space to explore! It also means you can socialise with your guinea pig, whatever the weather.



**Top tip:** Avoid plastic children's play houses for guinea pig accommodation. These aren't suitable for them due to how hot they can become in the summer months.

## Outdoor run

Guinea pigs are grazing animals – it's in their DNA! Weather permitting, they need a minimum of four to six hours a day on grass, or access to a good mixture of safe garden plants.



There are other reasons why the outdoors is good for them. Guinea pigs who are confined to a hutch for long periods of time are more likely to fight with their companions. On top of that, there's a greater risk of them suffering from health conditions due to a lack of Vitamin D and space to exercise.

### The garden run will need to be:

- 6ft by 4ft in size for two to three guinea pigs.
- wooden framed with a removable/hinged lid to allow easy access to the guinea pigs.
- well built to prevent predators getting in and prevent young children trying to climb in when you're not able to supervise.

Your guinea pigs will need multiple hiding areas/tunnels spread throughout their whole run – the more the better. They don't feel safe grazing in open spaces – it gives them the heebie-jeebies! So they'll often hide in one corner or under the only shelter available. Make sure they have several options to move between.

### Avoid metal and A-frame runs

Metal folding runs and A-frames aren't suitable for guinea pigs. Metal runs often don't have a secure lid, are flimsy against predators and weather, and guinea pigs can get trapped or injured due to the large mesh spacing. A-frames often only have one door so rounding up the guinea pigs can be very tricky. And they're rarely available in the required minimum size. So, in short, avoid them!

### Building yourself? That's great! But please read our dos and don'ts.

It can be fun building your own guinea pig accommodation, but it's vital you use the right materials. Here are a few things to keep in mind before you get started:

- **Chicken wire isn't suitable for animal housing** – it's too weak and easy for predators to break in to.
- **Use small gauge, strong welded mesh.** We recommend is 16g, but 12g is even better.
- **Nail or heavy-duty staple the mesh onto the inside of the run** to prevent your guinea pigs from chewing the framework.
- **Use suitable wood screws to secure the run panels together** – cable ties are not suitable.
- **Place secure bolts on doors of outdoor hutches, sheds and runs** – predators and young children can easily open swivel latches or flimsy bolts.
- **Run lids will need to be strong enough to withhold a predator or windblown items landing on them.** Ideally, make it in three sections with a supporting beam to aid the strength and prevent dipping in the middle.



# Enrichment



Like us humans, a guinea pig's happiness is influenced by their environment. So it's vital you provide them with everything they need to keep active and mentally stimulated.

Although guinea pigs aren't naturally playful, they do like to be kept busy with toys and will love anything involving food.

## Enrichment ideas for your guinea pig enclosure include:

- **Plastic igloos or tunnels** – these make great hiding spaces to help them feel safe and secure. Avoid using enclosed plastic hiding spaces such as igloos during hot weather, as they can retain the heat and cause heatstroke.

- **Cat carriers lined with newspaper and lots of hay.**
- **Cardboard boxes or card tunnels** – be sure to cut a few guinea pig-sized holes into the boxes to give them multiple entrances and exits.
- **Bendy stick bridges** – these make good hiding spaces.
- **Apple or willow tree branches and twigs for gnawing on.** They'll love the tasty bark, plus it's great for their tummies.
- **Paper bag half filled with hay and freshly picked safe plants.** Make sure you cut the handles off before placing in for them to rustle around in.
- **Safe plants and herbs in pots** – place these inside their enclosure or run for them to nibble on.
- **Plant pots turned upside down with hay or fresh forage placed underneath for them to try and get hold of!**
- **Stuffed toilet rolls with hay or forage hay as a treat.**
- **A garden hanging basket or magazine rack stuffed full of hay to avoid legs getting trapped.** Hang the baskets up in the run for them to reach up and explore the contents.



## Bedding materials

It's important to make the right choices when it comes to your guinea pigs' bedding. The wrong bedding can have a very negative effect on their health. Wood shavings, sawdust and straw can often contain fur mites, cause respiratory, fungal and mange conditions, and could give them (and their humans) an allergic reaction.

## The only way is hay

The most suitable bedding for your guinea pigs is hay. It also makes up a large chunk of their diet, so it has multiple uses! Line their enclosure with a thick layer of newspaper and completely cover it with a good, deep layer of fresh, sweet-smelling green hay. In the wild, guinea pigs live in dense vegetation and will use this to hide from predators, so the deeper you can make the hay, the better! Be aware that some people can be allergic to hay, mistakenly

thinking they are allergic to the guinea pigs themselves.

It's often more cost-effective to purchase hay from a local farm or equine shop by the bale. You can then pick a nice, green bale and reduce the risk of it being old stock and possibly contaminated or filled with sharp thistles. Go to **page 14** for examples of different hay you can use.

## Fleece bedding

You can also use fleece bedding for indoor guinea pigs, as long as they have multiple piles of fluffy hay to graze from. But be prepared to sweep and wash lots of blankets in your machine, as they'll need changing every couple of days!





## Cleaning

Top tip - line hutches and shed floors with vinyl for an easy-to-clean and wipeable surface under your guinea pigs' bedding.

Daily – spot clean	Weekly – refresh clean
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Pick up poo, wet hay and newspaper.</li><li>2. Replace dirty bedding with fresh hay and newspaper.</li><li>3. Change their water.</li><li>4. Remove any greens/forage they haven't eaten from the previous day.</li></ol>	<p>This may need to be done more often if you have a herd, and also throughout the winter when their time in the run is reduced.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Place guinea pigs in a secure plastic cat carrier with plenty of hay in. Put it in a safe, quiet space away from where you're cleaning.</li><li>2. Remove enrichment, bowls, bottles and clean them with pet-friendly disinfectant.</li><li>3. Fully sweep out their enclosure and wipe down with pet-friendly disinfectant.</li><li>4. Set up the enclosure with fresh bedding and place enrichment back in.</li></ol>



# Guinea pig companionship



Guinea pigs are naturally sociable creatures that need companionship to stay happy. In the wild, they live together in large herds, so they should always be kept in pairs or small groups. If you find yourself with a lone guinea pig of any age, contact Woodgreen or your local rescue centre to help find a pal for your guinea pig.

## How to help your guinea pigs become forever friends.

**While mixing guinea pigs isn't as easy as you might think, there are choices you can make to increase your chances of success.**

### Suitable combinations are:

- **Two or more sows.** This is usually straightforward without any hitches! Whereas with males...
- **Two boars.** It can be tricky to mix two single boars together. Sometimes, it takes multiple introductions to single males before a good match is found. If you have a pair under one year old, there is a risk that they may start to fight as they mature. This could lead to them needing to be separated.
- **A neutered boar with one or more sows.** These mixes are usually pretty successful!

### Careful consideration should be taken with the following combinations:

- **Three sibling boars** – although they often start off living together well, one guinea pig is likely to be badly bullied. So there's a high risk of them fighting and needing to be separated in the future.
- **A boar with a young male under one year old.** Although the mix may work at first, when the young male matures he'll compete for dominance, which could result in serious fights.



### Unsuitable combinations:

A rabbit and a guinea pig shouldn't live together. Although some owners have found that a rabbit and guinea pig can seemingly live happily in each other's company, there's a big risk that the guinea pig will be accidentally kicked when the rabbit is running and hopping about.

Guinea pigs are also vocal communicators, whereas rabbits are mostly silent, and this can be upsetting for them both.

## Introducing your guinea pigs to each other

If you find yourself with a lone guinea pig, we can help! We have an onsite mixing service where we can support you with finding a companion for them. This could involve mixing onsite or providing you with advice on how to mix them at home.

### Preparing to mix

When introducing guinea pigs, it's very important that it's done on neutral territory. Ideally, mix them in the outside run, on a patch of grass they haven't previously had access to. This will give them plenty of space, and the fresh grass will be neutral. If you do mix indoors, make sure they have plenty of space.

### To get ready for the mix you will need to:

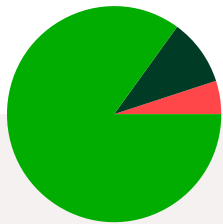
- Thoroughly clean the mixing area with a pet-friendly disinfectant (if you're not mixing on the grass outside).
- Add new/clean open-ended tunnels and hiding spaces (at least one per guinea pig, or more if you're able to add them in).
- Scatter hay throughout the area and under hiding spaces.
- Scatter their pelleted food and/or any forage or veg.

# Food glorious food:

## What to feed your guinea pigs

To help your guinea pigs live a long and healthy life, their diet should be as natural and varied as possible.

Guinea pigs are herbivores who need a full belly of fibre at all times. In the wild, they'd live in dense foliage and spend their days grazing, so a healthy daily diet should include the following:



- 85%** – soft, long, green sweet-smelling hay.
- 10%** – selection of safe plants and vegetables.
- 5%** – good-quality guinea pig pellet food.

### Hay

Spread this around the whole enclosure, run space and under hiding spaces. Guinea pigs need constant access to hay/grass, as they'll continuously eat. Seriously, they can't get enough of it. They should be eating a pile of hay the same size as themselves each day. It's also great for helping to keep their teeth healthy!

Offer a mixture of varieties such as:

- Baled mixed meadow hay.
- Forage treat hay by Burgess.
- Small amounts of Timothy Hay or Readigrass.

Avoid short, brown or yellow, dusty, mouldy hay as it lacks in nutrition and may harm your guinea pigs

### Portion sizes

#### Pellets

Around 1 egg cup (20g) of pellets per guinea pig, per day. Guinea pigs shouldn't be fed muesli mixes as they're high in sugar and can lead to dental problems and selective feeding. Here at Woodgreen, we feed our guinea pigs on Burgess Excel pellets, which you can buy online or from most pet shops.

#### Safe plants and vegetables

A handful per guinea pig, per day. Give them a variety of different fresh foods each day. You can pick and grow your own foods to feed them – see our list of safe foods on the next page.

#### Water

Daily fresh water is extremely important. Many guinea pigs prefer to drink from a bowl. Bottles are suitable but can often leak and be tricky to clean.

# Forage for your guinea pigs

As well as the food and snacks, there are all sorts of other natural foods – or forage – you can give your guinea pigs. And, if you fancy getting out into nature, you can go foraging to pick and collect lots of them yourself, for free!



It's more natural and closer to the diet these animals would have in the wild.

#### It's also:

- Healthy and lower in sugar than vegetables and fruit.
- A good way to make sure your pets are getting enough fibre, vitamins and minerals.
- Great for adding variety and enrichment to your pets' diet.
- A brilliant way to naturally wear your pets' teeth down and help prevent dental disease.

### What is forage?

Forage is food you can gather from where it grows naturally, and it doesn't cost you anything.

### Here are some ideas on what to feed your piggies:

- |                              |                                   |                                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Blackberry bramble         | • Golden rod                      | • Meadowsweet                   |
| • Campion (red and white)    | • Good King Henry                 | • Nettle                        |
| • Chickweed                  | • Goosegrass                      | • Nipplewort                    |
| • Clover                     | • Grass                           | • Plantain (rib and broad leaf) |
| • Cow parsley                | • Greater stitchwort              | • Prickly lettuce               |
| • Common agrimony            | • Ground elder (before flowering) | • Shepherd's purse              |
| • Cranesbill                 | • Hawksbeard                      | • Silverweed                    |
| • Dandelion                  | • Hawkweed                        | • Speedwell                     |
| • Dead nettle (white or red) | • Herb bennet aka wood avens      | • Sow thistle                   |
| • Dog rose                   | • Herb robert                     | • Willowherb                    |
|                              | • Mallow                          | • Yarrow                        |

## Where can I get it?

You'll find it in hedgerows, footpaths, fields and woods.

### Here are a few tips for success:

- Don't collect it from the roadside – it may be contaminated with exhaust fumes.
- Avoid areas which may have used weedkiller, fertilizer or other chemicals.
- Avoid paths and verges used by dogs or near poop bins.
- Don't trespass on private land!

## Different types of forage

### Wild plants

You can find all sorts of edible plants in fields and hedgerows – and you can feed your pets most of them fresh. But there are some, like nettles, that are better dried.

## Garden plants and herbs

You can feed your guinea pigs plenty of different garden plants and herbs when they're in season.

### Here are some examples:

- |                              |              |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| • Calendula                  | • Thyme      |
| • Hollyhocks (leaves)        | • Chamomile  |
| • Lavender                   | • Chervil    |
| • Nasturtium                 | • Coriander  |
| • Roses                      | • Dill       |
| • Sunflowers (not the seeds) | • Fennel     |
| • Wallflowers                | • Lemon balm |
| • Wild geranium              | • Lovage     |
| • Basil                      | • Marjoram   |
| • Bay borage                 | • Mint       |
|                              | • Oregano    |
|                              | • Parsley    |
|                              | • Rosemary   |

## Fruit and vegetables

Although you may not be able to 'forage' for fruit and vegetables as easily, here's a list of what's safe for your pets:

### Vegetables

- |                   |                 |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| • Broccoli        | • Peppers       |
| • Brussel sprouts | • Pumpkin       |
| • Cabbage         | • Radish tops   |
| • Carrot tops     | • Rocket        |
| • Cauliflower     | • Spinach       |
| • Celery          | • Spring greens |
| • Courgette       | • Swiss chard   |
| • Curly kale      | • Squash        |
| • Fennel          | • Watercress    |

### Fruit

As an extra, occasional treat, you can give your pets a small piece of apple, pear or tomato.

Guinea pigs also love to eat strawberry leaves, blackberry leaves and raspberry leaves (not the fruits).

## Trees and shrubs

The twigs and branches of several trees are a great source of enrichment for your piggies. You can put large branches inside their run and bundle up the smaller twigs and tie them to the sides of the run. **Here are some examples:**

- Apple
- Birch
- Hawthorn (but remove the thorns)
- Hazel (not the nuts)
- Pear
- Rose
- Willow



## Pick carefully!

Never collect protected plants or plants you don't recognise.





## Handling your guinea pigs

Most guinea pigs will wriggle or try to run away when you want to pick them up – this is completely natural. Although you can socialise with them, feed them from your hand and have them sit on your lap, they'll always remain slightly wary of humans. You're still a potential 'predator' in their eyes.



Guinea pigs can be fantastic pets for children, but make sure you supervise them at all times to prevent the guinea pigs from being squeezed or dropped. Encourage them to sit on the floor with a blanket on their lap for the guinea pig to sit on. This way, if your guinea pig moves, there's no risk of a fall or of your child being scratched.



## Getting around with your guinea pigs

It's important that you always have a suitable pet carrier available, just in case you need to rush your guinea pigs to the vet. They're also handy for when you're cleaning out their enclosure. Avoid cardboard boxes, as these can quickly and easily be chewed through, leading to escapees.

Hard plastic cat carriers like this one are perfect for your guinea pigs to use. To keep your guinea pigs relaxed and happy, place some newspaper or a fleecy blanket in the base of the carrier, along with lots of hay for them to eat and hide in.

## Finding a vet

It's really important to find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with guinea pigs. Most vets will see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs. Other species such as guinea pigs will rarely be seen by most vets. So finding someone who has lots of experience of seeing, diagnosing and treating this species is very important.

- **Look for an Exotics Veterinary Practice** – they may have more experience and might be cheaper in the long term than other vets.

- **Talk to friends and family who own or have owned guinea pigs** to see if there are any vets in particular that they recommend.
- **Talk to veterinary practices** to find out if there are any guinea pig savvy vets within the practice. Do not be afraid to ask them how many they see on a weekly basis to help you decide whether they are the right vet for you.



## Keeping your guinea pigs healthy

There are lots of things you can do to ensure your guinea pigs are in tip-top condition. Make sure you health check your guinea pigs weekly and look out for any changes in their behaviour every day (more on this below). Guinea pigs can be very good at hiding any health issues until they're really suffering!

Sometimes even the smallest thing, such as their poo looking a little smaller than normal or not rushing out to receive fresh food straight away, can be a clue to a poorly guinea pig. If you have any concerns, act quickly and contact your guinea pig savvy vet.

# How to health check your guinea pigs

Ideally, bring your guinea pigs indoors and sit them on a towel so they are comfy.

**Eyes** – should be clean, clear with no cloudiness, and bright with no wetness or discharge around the eye.

**Ears, nose and mouth** – should be clean, free of any discharge, flaky and scabby patches. No noisy breathing.

**Teeth** – top and bottom incisors (front teeth) should be white, smooth and wearing evenly against one another.

**Skin and coat should be:**

- clean and healthy looking
- no fur loss
- no red, flaky skin/dandruff
- no wounds
- no matted fur

**Weight** – adult males will usually weigh between 800 to 1200g, females 800 to 1000g. Use some small scales, eg. kitchen scales to monitor their weight. Use the UK Pet Food size-o-meter **here** to help with visually checking their size.

**Body** – should be free of any lumps or bumps. These often appear under their chin, along their back or in their armpit area.

**Feet and toes** – should be free of any sores and dry patches.

**Nails** – will need to be clipped every four to six weeks once they've reached around 1 year old. Contact us if you'd like more support or a mini lesson.

**Bottom and genitals**

– should be clean. Adult males over one year of age will need their genitals checked and cleaned regularly.



## Looking after boys' bits!

Most male guinea pig owners don't realise they need a little extra care and observation. Males over a year old need to have their penis cleaned every few months. This involves gently pushing down above the exposed skin and using damp cotton wool. This area is prone to a build-up of cheese-like discharge, which can eventually prevent your guinea pig from weeing normally.

Large dominant males can also be prone to 'impaction' from around three years old onwards. This is a rather smelly situation but can be fatal if not spotted and managed correctly. Impaction causes the anus to bulge, and a large ball of faeces will appear to be blocking him – despite a few normal poos in the cage. Speak to your guinea pig savvy vet if you spot this.

## Grooming and bathing

Contrary to popular belief, guinea pigs do not need to be bathed. Like a lot of other pets, they do a great job of keeping themselves clean. Bathing them can strip the fur of its natural oils, so it is best to leave them be (unless advised to by your vet).

If you have longer haired guinea pigs, they'll need daily grooming with a brush like this one to avoid

their fur from becoming matted. This can quickly happen if bedding becomes tangled within their fur. You may also notice the fur around their bottom becoming discoloured and tangled – regular grooming and being bathed if they get particularly dirty, will help with this. Trimming the long fur a little bit around this area to prevent it from dragging along the floor will also help.



# Looking for more expert pet advice?

We cover a range of different topics on our website – and not just for your small furry friends, but cats and dogs, too!

Not only that, but we also offer phone appointments, workshops, training classes, webinars and courses.

Find out more at [woodgreen.org.uk](https://www.woodgreen.org.uk), scan the QR code below or call 0300 303 9333.



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