

5. New Pet Guinea Pig

5.1 Should I get one guinea pig or two?

I've heard that the best toy to buy for a guinea pig is another guinea pig!

Guinea pigs are very social and enjoy living together. So if you can get at least two to keep each other company, that is best. If you can only have one, though, don't despair, because you will be its friend. However, if you do have more than one, keep in mind that you must have a large enough cage for both.

I have even heard that when one guinea pig dies, the remaining one can have difficulty adjusting, sometimes refusing to eat. That's how closely bonded they can become.

One caution, however, is that while males may live in pairs, it is best not to have them in larger groups, because they could fight. Females do well in pairs or groups.

5.2 What should I feed my guinea pig?

Guinea pigs should eat Timothy Hay (50% of its diet), guinea pig pellets (25%), and fresh produce (25%). There is a misconception that alfalfa hay is good for guinea pigs. Alfalfa hay is only good for YOUNG guinea pigs. After the first six months, a grass-based hay such as Timothy hay should be used. A wonderful source of tasty, fresh green hay is Oxbow Hay Company (oxbowhay.com). I have also been able to find it at a local PetSaver store.

Guinea pigs need Vitamin C added to their diet, either through supplements or by foods that naturally contain Vitamin C, such as oranges or sweet peppers. You can use liquid Vitamin C found in health food stores added to their water bottle or you can supplement with something like Chewable GTN-50C made by Oxbow Hay Company. Since our guinea pigs refused to try the supplement and disliked the liquid Vitamin C, we chose to give them red peppers on a daily basis to satisfy their Vitamin C requirements.

The kinds of produce that can be given to guinea pigs are: dandelion greens, grass, sweet peppers, oranges, apples, carrots, etc. Don't give guinea pigs lettuce, broccoli, or anything else that contains significant amounts of calcium, which their bodies can't process and sometimes causes kidney or bladder stones to form.

Note: The above information came from a veterinarian who specializes in cats and small critters. Apparently a lot of information in books (and on web sites) is inaccurate.

5.3 What else do I need for my guinea pig?

Your guinea pig will need a water bottle, food dish, and a place to hide or sleep. Some guinea pigs enjoy chewing on toilet paper or paper towel tubes. Our guinea pigs love hide under, chew on, and run through corrugated cardboard boxes that we make into houses/tunnels, by turning them upside down and cutting out door holes.

5.4 What kind of cage is best?

There are many kinds of guinea pig cages. The main thing is to consider is size. Many of the cages sold in pet stores are too small for guinea pigs, especially if you have two or more living together.

According to GuineaPigCages.com, you should have a minimum of 7.5 to 10.5 square feet for one or two guinea pigs. The two cages we originally purchased, for example, are about 1.3 x 2 feet, which is only 2.6 square feet each. When we linked them together with tunnels, it made a total of 5.2

square feet, plus several feet of tunnels. That worked well for a while, until we abandoned that setup and switched to the much larger Cubes & Coroplast Cage. (See more information in questions below).

5.5 What kind of bedding should I use in the cage?

The safest type of bedding, recommended by our vet, is the kind made from recycled paper. The brand we use is called Care Fresh. Most pet stores carry it nowadays. Other bedding, such as pine and cedar, can cause respiratory problems, and in fact, one of our guinea pigs developed a wheezing problem when we used pine bedding. This wheezing disappeared after we switched to CareFresh.

I find it helpful to put newspaper underneath the bedding to absorb some of the moisture. It also makes it easier when cleaning the cage, because you can simply roll up the newspaper with the bedding.

5.6 How could i get my guinea pig used to me and tame?

To get a new pet piggy used to you, you should be very patient yet still interact with him (or her) every day. He will be very scared at first, so let him get used to his new surroundings for the first day or two. Make sure he has a good, safe hiding spot. Allow him to eat his food in their and keep his food and water nearby, so he doesn't sit in the hiding spot and starve himself out of fear. Offer him treats, but if he's too shy, gently put it near him and go back a little way to watch and see if he takes it. If you find a special treat he likes, offer it every day and patiently wait for the day he will take it from your hand. Some pigs take a short time and others take a long time to get used to you.

Things to remember:

1. Do not grab your guinea pig with one hand, which is very scary and dangerous for him. Use two hands to pick him up, one under his bottom and the other under his chest and wrapped around his back.
2. Do not make sudden or loud noises near your guinea pig. Do talk softly to him and let him get used to your voice.
3. Do not chase your pig all around the cage to pick him up. Try to "corner" him gently, so he can't run away and then gently and firmly pick him up.
4. Do some research to find out what treats and foods are safe for your pig. Here are some web pages to get you started:

guinealynx.info/healthycavy.html#diet
guinealynx.info/pamphlet.pdf
guinealynx.info/guinea_pigs_are_great.pdf

5. It's nice to hold your pig in your lap with a blanket or something soft. Sometimes they like to cuddle up in there, because it's safe and warm.
6. It's very important that the guinea pigs have enough space to live and move around in. A lot of people don't realize how much space they need. GuineaPigCages.com has a lot of good information about cage size needed for guinea pigs.
7. Do NOT use one of those exercise balls - they are not safe for guinea pigs, no matter what the package says.

5.7 What can you train a guinea pig to do?

Guinea pigs don't do a lot of tricks like dogs, but you can get them to do some fun things. Like they will start to squeal for treats when they hear the sounds that are usually made for treats, such as crinkling a bag or opening the refrigerator or opening the door to go outside and get them grass. So you can take advantage of this and get them to squeak for a certain sound if you make that sound every time you give them food. For example, I usually go outside once a day and cut them a big bowl of grass with scissors. So before I go outside I tap the scissors on the plastic bowl and they start squeaking like crazy. They know that grass is coming soon. I never trick them meanly into thinking they will get grass without really getting it, though. If I tap the bowl, they always get grass and they know that.

Another "trick" I have mine do is to get "really tall" for special treats. They stand up on their hind legs and lift their body up really high. Some pigs have done this automatically and others seem to take a while to learn it, but it's fun to hold a piece of food up and have them stand up on their back legs and beg.

I'm sure you can probably think of some other ideas like this to train your pigs.

5.8 How often does my guinea pig need to exercise?

At least once a day, guinea pigs should be given "floor time" to run around and exercise. It is great fun to watch them run laps around a room or sneak off to explore another room. Make sure that there are no electrical cords low enough for them to chew on or anything toxic on which they might curiously nibble.

When the weather is nice, guinea pigs enjoy going outside to explore or nibble grass (if you haven't put lawn chemicals on it recently). You must supervise them closely outside to make sure they don't wander off and to keep them safe from other animals in the area. For outside time, I've found it helpful to have some sort of enclosure.

5.9 How much did your cages and tunnels setup cost for your guinea pigs? (NOTE: This was the old cage setup shown in my online stories, [Jailbreak](#) and [Hermione's Great Adventure](#). The new Cubes & Coroplast style cage, shown in my Guinea Pig Gallery (kathyskritters.com/tales/pgallery/cages.html), is discussed in the next question below.)

I bought the two large cages at a local pet store for approximately \$25 each. The tunnels (called Fun-nels) are actually marketed as ferret tunnels. The tube (straight) and elbow (curved) tunnels were bought at PetSmart, both at our local store and online, for approximately \$8 apiece. I bought the tee tunnel at PetCo.com for \$13, plus shipping.

I used 7 elbow tunnels, 4 tube tunnels, and a tee tunnel. I didn't buy these all at once, but gradually. So that's about \$100 in tunnels, combined with the 2 cages, for a grand total of about \$150.

We used to let our guinea pigs use the tunnels freely between the two cages, but then they decided that the tunnels were a nice "bathroom." This made the tunnels messy all the time, and since they were very hard to snap apart to clean, this became a problem. So we revised our approach to let our pigs use the tunnels to come down to the floor for playtime, but then we blocked their access to the tunnels at all other times. Since our pigs liked to be in the same cage together, we just alternated which cage they stayed in each day, so they were evenly soiled. That way, we could clean them both on the weekends.

One advantage of that approach was that when the pigs were out for playtime on the floor, they could use the tunnels to go home whenever they were tired, hungry, or had to go to the bathroom. Of course, there were lots of places they'd rather hide, like under the couch...

5.10 What is a Cubes & Coroplast Cage and why did you switch to that?

A Cubes & Coroplast Cage is made out of those metal grids that come packaged to create connectable storage cubes and a corrugated plastic material called coroplast. I found out about it at GuineaPigCages.com.

When the cages and tunnels setup (see previous question) proved to be a messy problem, our pigs ended up spending most of their day together in a 16" x 24" cage, which is only about 2.5 square feet of space. Even though they were given floor time at least once a day, this was not enough living space. So we built them a huge new cage, with cube grids for the sides and coroplast for the bottom. They now have 30 square feet of room to run around, including a second floor accessed by a ramp. They love to run up the ramp to their hayloft or do piggie laps around the "downstairs."

The new Cubes & Coroplast style cage is shown in my Guinea Pig Gallery (kathyskritters.com/tales/pgallery/cages.html), where detailed photos and specifications for making the cage can be found. Because of the new, larger cage, we were able to add a third guinea pig, Pippi, to our family. (You can learn more about Pippi by visiting Pippi's Pics (kathyskritters.com/tales/pgallery/pippi.html) in the Guinea Pig Gallery.)

5.11 Where did you buy the grids and coroplast to make your C&C cage?

I got the grids at Target in household goods. The coroplast, which is like corrugated cardboard, except made of plastic, was a bit harder to find.

I found coroplast at a plastics company that sells it to sign stores by looking in the yellow pages for plastic sheeting. The category in my yellow pages is "PLASTICS – RODS, TUBES, SHEETS, ETC. – SUPPLY CENTERS." You can also look under sign stores, but it may be more expensive. I actually called a sign store, who gave me the name of a supplier when I told them what I wanted it for. It comes in huge 4' x 8' sheets, and is not very bendable, so it was tricky to get in the car to get home. See if you can find a plastics supplier in the yellow pages, call them, and see if they will sell you a single sheet or two. I got two, because of the large cage I made. There are alternatives (linoleum, vinyl), but coroplast is so perfect for the job that it really is worth the trouble to get some.

There is some additional information at: GuineaPigCages.com/cubes.htm.

5.12 Do guinea pigs really sleep with their eyes open?

Yes, guinea pigs sleep with their eyes open. They can close them, but they often don't. It's like they're always on guard against "danger." Very cute!

5.13 What is the lifespan of a guinea pig?

Approximately five years, but as long as 8 to 10 years. If you decide to have a pet guinea pig, be sure that you can commit to taking care of it for that length of time.

6. Guinea Pig Pregnancy & Birth

6.1 At what age can I breed my guinea pigs?

First of all, unless you already have homes for the babies, you should not breed your guinea pigs. Consider getting your next pig from a shelter or rescue. A guinea pig rescued is a life saved.

Females should be between 5 and 10 months old. If she is older than 10 months, she should not be bred for the first time, since her pelvic bones fuse at 12 months old and she would be unable to deliver her babies. A male breeding with a first-time female ideally should be between 2 and 5 months old.

6.2 How long is a guinea pig's pregnancy?

The term of pregnancy runs between 67 and 73 days.

6.3 How can I tell if my guinea pig is pregnant?

Short answer: it's not easy to tell. The long answer is excerpted from the best guinea pig guidebook I know, *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* by Peter Gurney:

- "There is usually a telltale sign that a successful mating has taken place. You will find what appears to be a small plug of candle wax lying on the floor of the mated pair's quarters. This is produced by the boar only after he has successfully ejaculated in the sow and is meant to seal in his sperm." p. 124
- "There are a few pointers that can signpost the progress of the pregnancy. The first sign that we are in business is the sow's increased water intake, at about two to three weeks into her term. Gradually her girth will widen, beginning lower down on her body and then slowly ballooning upwards. Some guinea pigs grow grotesquely large and even become a little splay legged in the rear, while others just get slightly rotund." p. 125-126
- "You will feel a "quickenings" (independent movement of her young) a week to ten days before she is due to deliver. Just forward of the vulva you will feel the ends of the pubic bones. Feel them early on so that you will know what to look for when she gets closer to her time. Three to four days before the birth is expected, they will begin to part. When they have separated to a distance of about half an inch, you can expect the birth to occur anytime during the next 48 hours." p. 126-127

6.4 What should I do if my guinea pig is pregnant?

I will answer this with more information from the wonderful book, *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* by Peter Gurney:

- "Remove the boar as soon as you are sure that the sow is pregnant. This will not only avoid upsetting her with any changes closer to her time but will also be a precaution against another pregnancy and risking her babies! A boar will never intentionally harm his young. However, if they happen to get in the way when he tries to re-mate the sow when she comes into season a few hours after she has given birth, they may get injured or killed." p. 128-129
- "During the last three weeks of her pregnancy, ensure that she gets a daily bowl of bread and milk or a fortified milk-drink of the kind given to convalescents. Continue giving this two weeks post delivery, for it will be beneficial to both mother and young." p. 128

6.5 Can I hold my pregnant guinea pig?

You should NOT hold a pregnant sow unless needed. You don't want to add any extra stress to the pregnancy, and if you hold her wrong you could harm her or the babies. If it is necessary to pick her up, be sure to support her abdomen fully. (Special thanks to Emily Vastola for this info!)

6.6 How many babies does a guinea pig have?

For her first litter, a sow (female) usually has about 2 or 3. Subsequent litters can produce as many as 6 or 8.

6.7 What is a baby guinea pig like when it's born?

Unlike hamsters, guinea pig babies are born fully developed. They look just like grown-up guinea pigs, only miniature! They have fur and teeth, and their eyes are open too. The newborn can run and eat solid food. However, they still need their mother's milk for 3 to 4 weeks.

6.8 My guinea pig just had babies. I didn't even know she was pregnant. What should I do?

The mother will do a good job of taking care of her babies. They will drink her milk and also eat her stool, which contains the vitamin B-complex that they are not yet able to produce on their own. In addition, baby guinea pigs eat hay, lettuce, dandelion, oats, and pellets, just like their mother.

I would recommend getting a good book on raising guinea pigs (see my [Recommended Books](#) section). An excellent one is *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* by Peter Gurney (T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1999). Another good resource is *Guinea Pigs: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual* by by Katrin Behrend.

6.9 How can I tell the male babies from the females?

Both sexes have a y-shaped configuration in their genitalia. However, in boars (males), a small dot is visible in the center of the "y." If you press gently around this dot, you will see his male organ "pop" out.

6.10 When should I separate the males from the females?

Females are sexually mature at 4 weeks, and males at 3 to 4 weeks of age. Babies of the same sex may be allowed to stay together. Sometimes they, males especially, may start to fight each other for rank. As long as the dominance isn't dangerous (biting, teeth chattering, anything harmful) then they should be fine. Regardless of the sex, guinea pigs usually end up having an alpha of the group. (Special thanks to Emily Vastola for this info.)