



THE BARRACKS
VET SURGERY
MOSMAN

GUINEA PIG CARE

Guinea pigs are herbivorous rodents that originate from South America. They are also known as Cavies. Some of the 11 recognised breeds include the Abyssinian, Silky, Teddy, White Crested and Peruvian. Their natural curiosity and quiet, friendly disposition means that they can become used to handling, and are rarely aggressive. When picking them up, take care to support their entire body from underneath, and don't put them down on a table as they tend to walk off the edge. You should wash your hands before (and after) picking them up as the smell of other pets or animals on your hands can frighten them.

Guinea pigs can live up to 9 years (usually 6 - 7) and reach sexual maturity at 2 -3 months. Pregnancy lasts 60 -72 days and litters will contain 1 – 10 babies, which will be weaned after 20 days. Because they are social animals they should not be housed alone. However they can catch diseases from rabbits so keep rabbits and guinea pigs well apart. It is normal for guinea pigs to establish a pecking order, which you will see by them "barbering" or chewing each other's hair. If any problems such as over-grooming occur, it may be best to separate them into smaller groups. Give each animal plenty of space to reduce tensions, at least a metre cubed each.

Feeding

Guinea pigs should be fed a variety of vegetarian foods from a young age. Remember to introduce new foods slowly so you can watch for any adverse reaction. The main foods to feed are unlimited hay, grass, vegetables, herbs and a small but important source of Vitamin C, such as a quarter of an orange a day, or some cabbage or a kiwi fruit.

Hay is rich in the vitamins and minerals needed by guinea pigs. It also contains essential fibres needed by the intestine to make caecotrophs, the oval green "droppings" guinea pigs must eat. Hay purchased from pet shops is low in nutrients, and can be dirty or smell musty so many guinea pigs won't eat it. Buy horse hay which is always good quality. It should smell sweet, and can be slightly green. (Store it open to the air not in plastic bags.) Some good hay varieties include Timothy, Oaten, Pasture, Paddock, Meadow and Ryegrass hays. Avoid Lucerne and Clover hays which are too high in protein and calcium.

A variety of green vegetables and any herbs that are fresh enough to put on your own table are a great food source. Try broccoli, cabbage, celery, bok choy and other asian vegetables, carrot tops, spinach leaves, brussel sprouts and dark leafed lettuces. Vegetables on the turn can make a guinea pig quite sick. If you feed celery, chop it so that the long strings don't cause a problem and avoid iceberg lettuce which causes diarrhoea. Try fresh parsley, coriander, basil, dill mint and dandelion. Be sure to wash all vegetables well to remove pesticide sprays and traces of fertiliser.

Serve the vegetables wet as this will help digestion and water intake, as well as keeping the vegies fresh and delicious.

Provide clean fresh water in water bottles with drippers (provide two in case one becomes blocked). Bowls of water tend to become contaminated with urine, faeces and food. Don't worry if your guinea pig doesn't drink a lot as they also source a lot of their water from their food.

Keep dry packaged pellets or mixes to a minimum, and avoid rabbit food pellets altogether.

Foods that are a big no no include : nuts, seeds, cereal, grains, chocolate, corn, beans, peas, bread, biscuits, sugar, leaves of the beetroot or rhubarb plants, potato and potato peel, soursob and star jasmine.

Health

Newly acquired pets should go to the Vet for a checkup before they mix with other animals. There is a danger that lice or mites will be introduced by your new friend. During the year, keep an eye on their food intake, body and coat condition, eyes, ears, mouth, and toileting behaviour. Guinea pigs are prone to foot pad infections so always check your pet's feet and nails and make sure the floor of their cage is clean, dry and solid.

Dental health is an issue for guinea pigs, and the best prevention is the diet described above. Occasionally a guinea pig will have malocclusion and may need its teeth shortened if they grow into the bottom jaw. An annual visit to the vet will provide a dental health check and a nail clip to avoid overgrown nails.

Providing adequate Vitamin C in their diet will protect against scurvy.

Temperature can be a problem for guinea pigs, who easily become heat stressed as they cannot sweat. On hot days, give them a frozen water bottle to lie against. Pneumonia is also an issue, so protect them from cold weather too.

Housing

Guinea pigs need a secure home, but the typical hutches sold in stores can cause foot problems. Buy or make a hutch that:

- does not have a wire floor
- can easily be cleaned daily
- provides shelter from temperature, wind and rain
- has a hidden sleeping compartment, box or plastic pipe
- has adequate air flow
- has a large run which receives natural light
- has a flooring of torn paper which is changed daily (hay, although an essential food, can cause eye injuries if used as bedding)
- has plenty of water which can't be tipped over, and is checked daily
- has a variety of toys and objects for interest which are changed often.

A hutch should give your pet a sense of safety, as they are "prey" animals and can be anxious. Make sure neighbourhood cats and dogs cannot get near your guinea pig if playtime is outside the hutch. Plenty of stimulation and exercise is essential for strength and happiness so make the hutch and run as large, interesting and varied as possible.

If you have any concerns or questions, please call us at The Barracks Vet on 9969 1100.