

# The Ultimate Cavy Care Guide



| Photo by petmd.com

Guinea pigs, or “cavies” (coming from their scientific name, *Cavia porcellus*) are domesticated rodents native to the west coast of South America. Despite their name, guinea pigs do not originate from Guinea, nor are they pigs. They aren’t even relatives of the pig family (misleading, I know)! Some people think that guinea pigs derived their name from the squealing sounds they make, while others believe the

name came from the British coin – called a guinea – and that one guinea was the price of a guinea pig in sixteenth century England. The true reason behind the name is unknown. From the time of their discovery and domestication thousands of years ago in South America, cavies have made their way into the hearts and homes of many. They are loved for their gentle, affectionate nature and make great companions to dedicated owners of many ages. Here is an overview of cavy care brought to you by Nicole Dempsey (that’s me!), RVT, guinea pig enthusiast, and owner/admin of The Cavy & Critter Community.

## General Cavy Characteristics

On average, guinea pigs will live between 4-8yrs, but it is not uncommon for healthy, well-cared guinea pigs to live a little past 8. Although they come in all shapes and sizes, a good general guideline to weight includes the following: an adult male cavy typically should weigh between 2.1-2.6lbs (950-1,200g) while an adult female should typically weigh between 1.5-1.8lbs (700-850g). These critters have a keen sense of smell and also have very sensitive hearing. Guinea pigs are able to recognize their owners and return affection. They adapt well to habits and routines, and they are smart enough to know what it takes to make their owners cater to their every cavy desire! Guinea pigs are known to be comical, gentle, and curious pets. Unlike other rodents, they are neither strictly diurnal nor nocturnal. Instead, guinea pigs scatter their periods of activity throughout the day and night, with short “cat naps” every so often between activities.

## Behavior and Socialization

Guinea pigs display many behaviors in order to communicate with us and each other. It's important to be able to recognize these behaviors and learn what is normal for your cavy companions so that you can better identify their moods, and if something is bothering them. *Running/scurrying*



| Photo by [smallpetchannel.com](http://smallpetchannel.com)

*away* when you attempt to pick up your new guinea pig is a normal action that is pretty much hard-wired into the rodent's brain. Guinea pigs are prey animals and have virtually no defense mechanism when it comes to predators. In the wild, a fast piggy is a safe piggy! Many guinea pigs can be curbed of their fleeing instincts if given patience and commitment during the bonding process, but some make better lap companions than others. Loud noises or sudden movements may spook even a laid-back guinea pig, considering their genetic makeup. Like people, each guinea pig has their own distinct personality, and some would simply rather be off doing their own thing. This doesn't mean that you can't still build a bond with your cavy, it just means your new friend is a strong, independent pig!

*Popcorning* is the term used to describe the guinea pig's signature "happy dance." A guinea pig may run and jump once or even multiple times when excited or in a good mood. For many guinea pigs, this behavior occurs during floor time, or while they are playing about in their cage. It's a very recognizable behavior and a favorite by most cavy owners! *Freezing* in place is a behavior displayed when a guinea pig feels threatened, either by noise, sudden movement or by something unfamiliar in their environment. The goal is to be as invisible as possible. This behavior also lets fellow guinea pigs know something might be up. The guinea pig does not to draw attention to himself in the event that a predator is near. This behavior may also be accompanied by very alert, wide- open eyes. Speaking of eyes, it's not abnormal if your guinea pig naps with them open! As previously mentioned, they are prey species and rely on their senses to keep them safe from predators. Guinea pigs will sleep with their eyes open in order to remain alert in case something were to raise suspicions in their environment. A very relaxed piggy may close his eyes to sleep, which means he feels

secure in his environment. *Teeth chattering* is a sign that you have an angry little pig. They often make this noise when they are displeased with something. An angry guinea pig may also let out a high-pitched shriek to let you know he is upset about something. If you are petting your guinea pig and he lifts his head backwards, he is telling you he's had enough!

Guinea pigs are very social animals and in most cases, should be housed either in same-sex pairs or groups. You'd be surprised how much more vocal and active a guinea pig becomes once he has a friend! Unfortunately, the social needs of this species simply cannot be met by human interaction alone. They need someone who shares their language and behavior. It's typically easiest to introduce pups to each other, or a pup to an adult. However it is often times possible to bond two adult guinea pigs to each other. Boars (males) may take more time and commitment to the bonding process than sows (females).

To learn more about the different behaviors and explore the vocalizations guinea pigs make, check out the links below!

Behavior → <http://jackiesguineapiggies.com/guineapigbehaviour.html#agress>

Sounds → <http://www.guineapighub.com/guinea-pig-sounds/>

## Housing Options

There are certain things to consider when deciding how to house your guinea pig. As mentioned above, they are social animals and with that being said, they do well when housed in a same-sex pair or herd. A lonely cavy can become bored and depressed. When it comes to the size of your cavy's cage, the bigger the better! A popular option among cavy



Photo by [guineapigcages.com](http://guineapigcages.com)

enthusiasts is a C&C (aka cube & coroplast) cage, which is purchased unassembled. A large C&C enclosure as pictured above is recommended and can be extended if you decide to add new members to your cavy herd. Guinea pigs can be happily housed together in groups of 2-5

as long as their enclosure meets size requirements. Guinea pigs generally aren't good climbers, so an open-top enclosure would be a viable option as long as you don't have dogs or cats that can gain access to the cage. It also allows for easy-access for cleaning and cuddling. Although some guinea pigs will use additional levels to their cage, it is not completely necessary, as they are ground-dwelling rodents and require more ample solid floor space. A second level should not be included when measuring if a cage is going to be large enough for your pigs, as not all will use these additional levels. The most important factor is to make sure your cavy have lots of space to roam and are safe from predators. A standard 2X4 C&C cage is a good size for two sows and the minimum requirement for two boars. Below is a good general guideline for housing your cavy companions.

Guinea Pig Cage Size Standards						
MINIMUM			Number of Guinea Pigs*	PREFERRED		
Area	Grids	Size		Area	Grids	Size
7.5 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x3 grids	27" x 41"		10.5 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x4 grids	27" x 56"
7.5 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x3 grids	27" x 41"		10.5 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x4 grids	27" x 56"
10.5 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x4 grids	27" x 56"		13 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x5 grids	27" x 71"
13 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x5 grids	27" x 71"		16 ft <sup>2</sup>	2x6 grids	27" x 84"

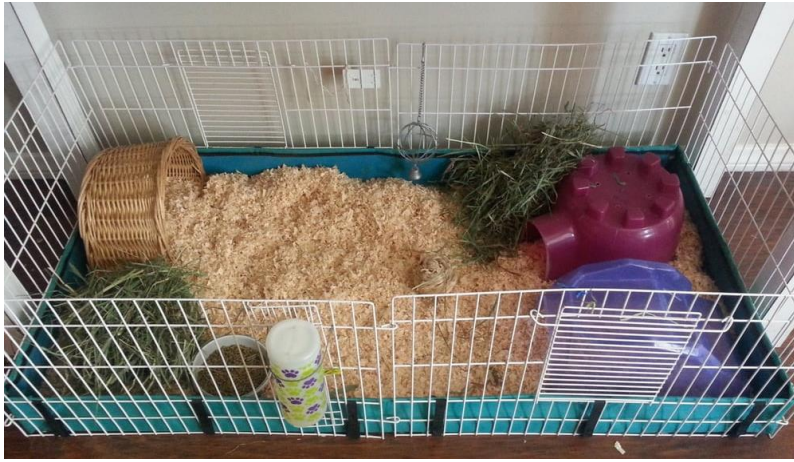
\* for male pairs or groups of all males, go up one cage size

\* you should almost always adopt two non-breeding guinea pigs, not just one. They are happier and healthier in pairs or more.

Note: A Grid is LARGER than a foot! 2x3 grids is LARGER than 2x3 feet!

Photo by [alittlebitiffyanimalsanctuary.com](http://alittlebitiffyanimalsanctuary.com)

The cage you choose should have good ventilation and located in a part of the house without drafts to prevent your guinea pig from becoming ill. The cage you choose should also have a solid base as opposed to wire or mesh. Wire and mesh floors pose the risk of injury to your guinea pig and may also cause sore feet. Though many guinea pig owners rave about C&C cages and their likeness, others might not be fans – usually from a visual design standpoint. Luckily, there are other suitable options out there. If you're any type of handyman, you might even find building your own cage to be a fun and rewarding experience. Let's take a look at some of these other options below.



*Pictured to the left is a Midwest Guinea Pig Habitat, which would be a suitable option for 2 adult sows. Midwest cages, similar to C&Cs, can be expanded to add more space for additional guinea pigs or ones that require a little more elbow room.*



*Pictured to the left is an All Living Things Small Animal Habitat in XL. The cage measures 46.9 inch L x 22.8 inch W and is the minimum recommended size for 2 guinea pigs. This cage can be connected to a second one to add additional space. This is one of the select few store-bought cages that would be suitable for the species.*

*A few examples of home-made cages built using a variety of cavy-safe building materials such as melamine and plexiglass.*



*My most recent cage setup for my guinea pigs is pictured below. These are two separate cages on top of each other, each suitable for 2 guinea pigs.*



If you're interested in building your own guinea pig cage, I found this video super helpful:

VISIT → <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ssDF6aebbE>

## Bedding Options



Photo by info.piggyepigpigs.com

There is an abundance of bedding options available on the market today, but not all of them are suitable for your cavy companion. Options such as cedar, pine, saw dust, and large wood shavings are not ideal and should be avoided, as these types of bedding can be irritating to your cavy's sensitive respiratory tract, eyes, and harsh on their feet. A popular choice of bedding among guinea pig owners include paper-based bedding such as Carefresh. Reportedly soft and absorbent, the primary drawbacks are price and some dustiness. There are cheaper paper-based bedding alternatives such as Critter Care, which is the generic version of Carefresh, or Kaytee Clean N' Cozy. If you decide to go with a paper-based or recycled newspaper bedding, it's best to avoid ones that contain baking soda. Some companies add baking soda as one of the ingredients to help with odor control, however the residues stick to their coat and consequently become ingested during grooming. Since guinea pigs have both sensitive digestive tracts and respiratory tracts, ingesting and breathing in baking soda may cause health complications such as an upset stomach or upper respiratory infection. Fleece is another popular bedding option among guinea pig owners, and is cheaper in the long-run, however not suitable for every owner or cavy. To learn more about fleece bedding, you can view the "*Fleece Bedding Guide*" in our group files.

## Nutrition

Your cavy's diet plays a crucial role in his or her overall health and life span. As grazing herbivores, guinea pigs are adapted to survive on a diet of high fiber, low calorie grasses and vegetation. It is important to realize that guinea pigs, like their rabbit cousins, are coprophagic, meaning that they eat their own feces. Several times daily, your cavy will produce partly-digested fecal pellets called

Photo by therabbithouse.com



caecotrophs which will be consumed orally. They then will pass through the digestive system again and all remaining nutrients are extracted from them via a fermentation process.

*Coprophagy, though seemingly unpleasant, is a necessary, nutritionally beneficial function for guinea pigs.* 80% of your cavy's diet should consist of grass hay. Alfalfa hay is a legume hay that is much higher in protein, calcium and carbohydrates. For these reasons, it is primarily fed to young pups and pregnant or nursing sows. Alfalfa hay should be avoided in adult guinea pigs over the age of 6 months. Instead, fresh grass hay including timothy, orchard grass, meadow, oat, or botanical hay can be fed daily. Each of these types of hay has its' own texture and level of sweetness: so mixing them up may benefit your cavy companion and help you find which he likes the best! Hay should be free-fed and available at all times for your cavy to enjoy. It's important to inspect your hay for freshness. Never feed your guinea pig hay that appears old or moldy. Although a bad crop season is possible and does occur, you can typically count on certain companies such as *Small Pet Select, KMS Hayloft, and Oxbow*, to provide fresh and healthy hay for your pet. You can also check with your local feed store for good deals on hay.

| Photo by [thesprucepets.com](https://thesprucepets.com)



Water should be available at all times as well, ideally from a leak-proof bottle. Providing water from a bowl is a controversial topic in the cavy community, as many guinea pigs may inhale the water on accident. If you choose to provide water in a bowl, be sure to change the water multiple times each day, as the water is bound to become contaminated with your

pet's dropping, hay, and bedding. Fresh vegetables should make up about 15% of your cavy's diet. It is recommended to feed your cavy one cup per day of fresh veggies. The final 5% of your cavy's diet should consist of a timothy-based pelleted commercial diet. Typically, pellets should not exceed 1/8 cup per pig per day (unless otherwise instructed by your exotics' vet) and should not make up a large part of your cavy's overall diet. For guinea pigs under 6 months of age, an alfalfa-based pellet is ideal. Once guinea pigs reaches 6 months old, you can transition them to a timothy-based pellet which they will be eating for the rest of their lives. If you're housing guinea pigs of different ages in the same enclosure and find it difficult to separate during feeding or keep each guinea pig from eating out of the other's bowl, you can mix both foods together to assure each guinea pig is at least getting a share of their ideal pellet. Commercial diets



containing seeds, nuts, or colorful bits should be avoided, as these options are neither complete nor balanced to suit your guinea pigs' nutritional needs. Currently, *Oxbow Essentials* (young and adult guinea pig food) is one of the best on the market.

**Guinea pigs, unlike other pocket pets, are unable to synthesize their own Vitamin C, and can develop serious health complications when there is not enough Vitamin C in their diet.** Although it is believed that feeding a timothy-based pelleted diet in combination with fresh veggies daily will provide adequate Vitamin C, some U.S veterinarians still recommend providing supplementation in a chewable or tablet form. Vitamin C supplements that are meant to be added to water should be avoided because liquid Vitamin C will deactivate within 20mins of exposure to light. If you are following the recommended diet of fresh veggies daily, hay, and pellets, you should only need to supply your cavy with a Vitamin C supplementation as an extra tasty treat. Feeding one small piece of bell pepper daily is another good way to make sure you guinea pigs are receiving enough vitamin C in their diet. Bell peppers are not only safe for daily consumption, but also contain a good amount of vitamin C – red ones containing the most. For a list of vegetables your guinea pigs can enjoy, take a look at our “*Vet-Approved Veggies*” file.

## Enrichment

A busy guinea pig is a happy guinea pig. Enrichment is a key factor in ensuring your cavy companion is kept healthy and active. You can provide your guinea pig with plenty of natural wood chews to keep him busy.



Photo by [cavycollective.com](http://cavycollective.com)

These chews will also wear down your cavy's open-rooted incisors and help prevent tooth overgrowth. Safe wood chews include apple orchard wood, willow, pear, and other *untreated* woods. Guinea pigs usually like tunnels to run through, hide-a-ways, and soft cuddle-cups or piggy-safe beds to rest on. Hanging chews with bells often make good in-cage enrichment for your covies as well. You don't always have to spend money in order to keep your covies busy. A simple yet effective idea to provide enrichment for your herd is to fill a paper bag with hay, chews, and treats for your covies to toss around and rummage through. The cavy's inquisitive nature makes paper bags and cardboard boxes extremely appealing to them. Be sure to give your covies plenty of out-of-the-cage time too. They often like to be pet and cuddled by their

owners and daily one-on-one time is a must if you want to build a strong bond with your cavy. You can allow your cavies to run around outside of their enclosure so long as you have a safe, piggy-proof area for them to roam and play. For more ideas on enrichment, you can visit the “*Exotic Pet Enrichment Guide*” in our group files.

## *Common Cavy Health Issues*

The best medicine is preventative medicine! By providing your cavy proper housing, nutrition, and enrichment, you are less likely to encounter health complications. Below are some common cavy health issues and how they can be avoided.



Photo by vetstreet.com

**Bite Wounds** – Cavies are mild-mannered and nonaggressive. Although during a confrontation they may chatter their teeth and shriek, they rarely bite one another. You can reduce the incident of bite wounds by making sure your cavies are not overcrowded and that they are compatible. Slowly introducing two cavies on neutral ground several times before expecting them to share enclosures is the best way to ensure they can live together harmoniously. Bite wounds from cats or dogs can have terminal consequences so make sure your cavies are safely away from all predators.

**Pododermatitis** – This refers to sores or ulcers on the bottom of your cavy’s feet. These painful sores are often the result of wire mesh or abrasive cage floors. Making sure your cavy is at an ideal, healthy weight can also help prevent this issue.

**Obesity** – Obesity is a common problem in pet cavies. Their diets should consist mostly of hay and fresh veggies. Feeding more than 1/8 cup per day of a pelleted diet can easily lead to an overweight cavy. Lack of exercise can also be a contribution so make sure your cavy has plenty of room to roam in his or her enclosure and time out of the cage as well.

**Scurvy** – Scurvy is caused by a lack of Vitamin C. As mentioned previously, cavies cannot produce their own Vitamin C, therefore it must be supplemented for them and provided daily to ensure good health. The average cavy needs between 10 and 30 mg/kg of Vitamin C daily. Actual requirements can vary from one guinea pig to another. Young, pregnant, and ill pigs need more vitamin C than the average pig. Signs of scurvy may include but are not limited to

weakness, lethargy, rough hair coat, weight loss, reluctance to eat or drink, and discharge from the eyes and nose.

As a general rule, it is best to observe your cavy daily and examine him or her often in order to notice any changes in mood, behavior, or appearance. Guinea pigs are prey animals so often times they will not show any sign of illness until they are extremely ill. Remember that maintaining a healthy cavy goes hand-in-hand with providing proper husbandry. For further questions regarding your pet cavy, please consult your exotics' veterinarian.

Sources:

"The Guinea Pig Handbook" written by Sharon L. Vanderlip, D.V.M, 2003 by Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

<http://topflite.co.nz/tips/quinea-pig-nutrition/> Care sheet created by Nicole Dempsey, R.V.T