

Ask A Vet: Guinea Pig Pointers

Sunday, March 5, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I have never had any pets besides a dog in the house. My son would like to get a guinea pig for a pet. Is this a difficult pet to take care of? What are some basics we should know about?

Sincerely, Mr. Piggy

Dear Mr. Piggy,

Guinea pigs make wonderful pets! They are native to South America and live in rocky areas, deserts, forest edges and swampy areas. They live in small groups and live in burrows. They are most active at night and forage for many different types of plant material. There are many breeds of guinea pigs with a wide variety of haircoat types and colors. They are social animals and do better when housed with a friend. Many of the medical problems that guinea pigs encounter can be prevented with proper diet and husbandry. Guinea pigs generally live 4-5 years, but can live up to 7-8 years with proper care.

Guinea pigs should always have plenty of fresh, clean water available to them. Hay should also be constantly available. Alfalfa is not necessary and is often detrimental due to its high calcium content. Good quality grass hay (especially timothy) is best. A complete, vitamin and mineral fortified pellet made specifically for guinea pigs ensures that your pet is getting a balanced diet. Choose a pellet specifically for guinea pigs, that is age appropriate and that is free of seeds, nuts, corn, etc. Guinea pigs cannot digest/metabolize these ingredients - they are like junk food for guinea pigs. It is best to buy new pellets each month as vitamin C content is greatly decreased after 30 days. Guinea pigs also benefit from greens/vegetables - avoid iceberg lettuce and limit things such as spinach, collard greens, parsley, kale and dandelion greens. Introduce new foods slowly to avoid diarrhea and GI upset. Fruits should be limited to 1-3 times/week and considered a treat - guinea pigs do not need the extra sugar that is in fruits. Small amounts of apple, peach, plum, pear, melon, raspberry, blueberry, blackberry and pineapple are acceptable, high fiber fruits. Only give treats to guinea pigs that are not overweight. Vitamin C supplementation is important to prevent a disease called scurvy. They should receive this supplementation daily via tablet or liquid as well as vegetables high in vitamin C, such as red, yellow and green bell peppers.

Guinea pigs should be housed in enclosures at MINIMUM 1 foot wide by 2 foot long with 1 foot tall sides. It is best to have larger cages to allow for more exercise and individual spaces for each guinea pig. Your guinea pigs will be less stressed if they have more space. The cage should have a solid floor with dust-free bedding such as shredded newspaper, commercial guinea pig bedding or an absorbent fleece liner that should be changed at least weekly. You will need a water bottle or heavy ceramic water bowl, heavy ceramic food bowl, hidey homes/tunnels, litter box and a container for hay. Guinea pig-safe toys are optional, but provide environmental enrichment.

Yearly visits with a veterinarian who is comfortable with guinea pigs is important to assess the health of your pet, and check for signs of illnesses such as scurvy, GI/dental disease, hair/skin/foot problems, respiratory problems and reproductive/urinary problems. Guinea pigs make marvelous pets if you are willing to care for them properly! Good luck!

-Dr. Ashley Vander Wey