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Did you know we also make delicious and
nutritious food for dogs, cats, rabbits,
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Guide to Guinea Pigs

Burgess Pet Care's guide to
caring for your Guinea Pig



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How to keep your guinea pig happy and healthy

What a lovely pet a guinea pig is. Small and gentle-natured, but lively too, they love being handled, they're inquisitive, they're quite vocal and they rarely bite or scratch. They live for between four and eight years and they're not difficult to look after.

But looking after them properly does mean knowing about the right handling, housing and food – and that's just what this Care Guide is all about.

Read it carefully and you'll be ready for the enormous rewards of having a pet guinea pig of your very own.

Companionship



Guinea pigs love company and should ideally be kept in single sex groups or pairs – litter mates make the best companions. Males and females can live happily together, but should ideally be neutered to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Never keep guinea pigs with a rabbit. They may fight, and the smaller animals may get bullied.

Housing

Whether your guinea pigs live indoors or outside, a hutch is the perfect place for them. But it's important to choose the right size, put it in the right place and put the right things in it.

Size

The hutch should be at least five times your guinea pig's length and at least a foot wide – you'll need to get a bigger hutch if you have more than one guinea pig. As a general rule: the more space, the better.

Lining

Use soft wood shavings or shredded paper along with some fresh straw bedding to keep your pets comfortable and warm. An upside-down cardboard box makes good extra shelter and can easily be moved around.

Location

Guinea pigs live happily inside or outside, but the location of an outside hutch needs special care. Temperatures shouldn't reach lower than 18°C or higher than 26°C – extremes of temperature, but especially overheating, will cause stress and discomfort.

That means moving the hutch indoors during the colder winter months and keeping a careful eye on the temperature during hot summers – never place a hutch in direct sunlight.

An outside hutch should stand on bricks or legs to stop it getting wet in poor weather. Make sure the roof is waterproofed and sloped to let the rain drain off.

All guinea pigs need safe, daily access to an outside run where they can eat grass and exercise.

And finally, always, always keep the door locked – firstly to stop your guinea pigs escaping, and secondly to avoid predators like dogs, cats and foxes getting in.

Cleaning

Clean the hutch out two or three times a week – especially in warmer weather, to keep flies away. In extremely hot weather, bedding may need to be changed even more often to stop it becoming mouldy and damp.

Handling



It's easy to scare your guinea pigs when you approach them, so it's best to crouch down and talk softly as you get nearer. Let your pets come to you – offer your hand to sniff, perhaps – then gently place your hand across their shoulder with the thumb tucked between the front legs on one side.

You should then be able to slowly lift your guinea pigs and support their weight by putting your other hand under their bottom. You should then hold your pets on your lap or, if you're standing, close to your chest.

Grooming



If your guinea pig is a long-haired breed, groom daily to keep their coat in good condition. But every breed likes some grooming – and it helps to strengthen the bond of friendship between you and your pets.

Neutering



Vets recommend that all guinea pigs should be neutered. It not only prevents unwanted pregnancies, it will also make your pets calmer and less aggressive. Please ask your vet about the correct age for neutering.

Feeding



What is often not understood is that guinea pigs need high levels of a mix of two types of fibre in their digestive system – digestible and indigestible fibre. Burgess Excel call the correct ratio of these two types of fibre '**Beneficial Fibre**'. This need for high levels of fibre in their diet is also why Burgess Excel refer to these pets as '**Fibrevores**'.

To ensure that they extract as much of the nutritional value from their food as they can, 'fibrevores' re-ingest it, this means that it goes through their digestive system twice. To understand how this works it helps to know a little about two different types of fibre.

Indigestible fibre is moved through their digestive system and excreted as separate, round, hard droppings. This acts to keep the digestive system moving and stimulate appetite.

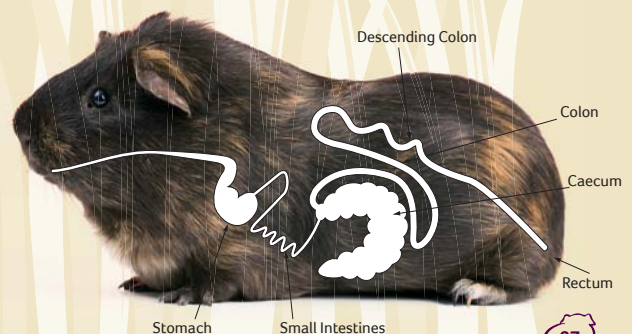
Digestible fibre is moved up into an organ called the caecum – this is like a giant appendix. Good bacteria in the caecum ferment the fibre (part of the digestion process) which then emerges in the form of clumps of sticky droppings – called caecotrophs. Guinea pigs then re-eat the caecotrophs and their systems extract essential nutrition as the digestible fibre passes through for the second time.

Failing to provide adequate portions of the right kind of fibre can rapidly lead to illness or death. At Burgess Excel, we call the correct ratio of these two types of fibre '**Beneficial Fibre**'.

That's why muesli-style foods are such a problem. Guinea pigs can become fussy eaters, and will eat sweet foods as an easy way to get a glucose fix. As a result, they can pick out unhealthy elements of muesli-style foods and leave the rest. This is called selective feeding and will inevitably lead to an imbalanced diet, lacking in calcium, phosphorus and vitamin D. Above all, this behaviour can lead to a lack of fibre with potentially fatal consequences. When taken with the fact that muesli-style foods are commonly low in fibre to begin with, the problem is compounded.

The unhealthy ingredients in muesli-style foods are high in sugar and starch. These are difficult for guinea pigs to digest and can lead to health problems and obesity.

And finally, Guinea pigs cannot produce vitamin C naturally. Therefore they need to be fed a food that is high in vitamin C. This is why guinea pigs should not be fed on rabbit food.



The Excel Feeding Plan

Burgess Excel is the first range to offer a complete feeding plan which provides all the essential fibre, nutrients, vitamins and minerals that guinea pigs need. Health and happiness in five simple steps.

The Excel Feeding Plan = Complete Nutrition



These problems can be avoided by sticking to **The Excel Feeding Plan** and giving your guinea pigs **Excel** food. Both were developed by Burgess with one of the world's leading small-animal vets to provide a perfect daily balance of fibre and nutrition.

Step 1 – Excel Herbage and Forage

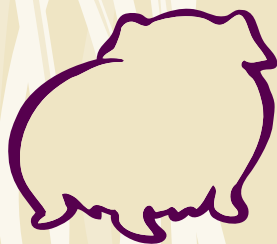
These premium quality hay and grass foods should form most of your pets' diet. They are especially good for dental health as they contain high levels of Beneficial Fibre that help to wear down teeth. The teeth of guinea pigs are constantly growing and overgrown teeth can be the cause of potentially fatal problems.

Step 2 – Excel Tasty Nuggets

These contain 100% natural, wholesome ingredients, are naturally high in Beneficial Fibre for digestive health and have added vitamins, minerals and prebiotics. Because they're not a muesli-style mix, they prevent selective feeding.

Step 3 – Excel Nature Snacks

These healthy, nutritious natural snacks are ideal for guinea pigs as they promote emotional health - preventing boredom and encouraging bonding and interaction between you and your pet. They can be fed daily, because they're packed with goodness, and all made with pure, natural ingredients. Some are specially designed to be fed by hand which helps pets to get comfortable with human attention.



Step 4 – Fresh Greens

Guinea pigs can be fed fresh greens to give additional fresh nutrients and to provide some variety. But you need to be careful about what you feed them, and how much – please see below for more information.

Step 5 – Fresh Water

A plentiful supply of fresh, clean water must always be available.

Guinea pigs also need fresh greens, fruit or herbs – around a teacup a day. But be careful; not every fruit and vegetable is actually good for guinea pigs. Here's a brief guide, but it is by no means exhaustive. Always check before feeding something new to your pets.

Good

Apples, asparagus, basil, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cantaloupe melon, carrots and carrot tops, cauliflower leaves and stalks, celery, chicory, Chinese parsley, coriander, cucumber, dill, garden cress, grapefruit, gooseberries, honeydew melon, kale, kiwi fruit, mangoes, oranges, parsley, parsnips, peas, red cabbage, red chard, romaine lettuce, Savoy cabbage, spinach, strawberries, tangerines, tomatoes, turnips and water cress.

Bad

Potato and potato tops, rhubarb and rhubarb leaves and tomato leaves.

Poisonous Plants

There are several plants that are poisonous to guinea pigs. Never feed them to your pets and make sure there's no access to them in the house or garden – preferably, your home should be free of them altogether.

This isn't an exhaustive list, but some plants and flowers that are poisonous to guinea pigs are: bindweed, bryony, buttercup, bluebell, crocus, daffodil, dock, foxglove, hyacinth, laburnum, poppy, ragwort, sorrel, antirrhinum (snapdragon), tulip and yew.



Common health problems

There are many different health problems that guinea pigs face, but most can be avoided by good diet and a healthy lifestyle. The rest need quick attention by a vet. Although there are no specific vaccinations that your guinea pig should have, there are viruses and infectious diseases which can make your pet very unwell. Once they become ill, guinea pigs can deteriorate very quickly, so if you think your pet is off-colour, always see your vet as soon as possible.

Medical Emergencies

Poorly guinea pigs will often show a set of non-specific symptoms. As soon as you see any of the symptoms on this list, which may be a sign of serious problems, take your guinea pig to the vet as soon as possible:

Refusal to eat or drink; lethargy; difficult or laboured breathing; sneezing; crusty eyes; limping; loss of balance; excessive scratching; hair loss; uncontrollable bleeding; extreme drop in body temperature; diarrhoea; blood present in urine; signs of temporary paralysis.

You should also know that penicillin-based medication is poisonous to guinea pigs.

Problems caused by poor diet

The following problems are often due to poor diet, lack of exercise and lack of general care. They're easily avoided by giving your guinea pigs the right food and plenty of exercise and, most importantly, by carrying out regular health checks. For a guide, see page 12.

Dental problems

Your guinea pigs' teeth will continue to grow all their lives and overgrown teeth can be the cause of potentially fatal health problems - typical symptoms are excessive drooling and loss of appetite.

To wear down your guinea pigs' teeth and help to keep them healthy, feed a naturally-abrasive, fibre-rich food like Burgess Excel Herbage or Forage and check their teeth regularly - see page 13 for more details.

Hypovitaminosis C

This condition is more commonly known as scurvy and it stems from a lack of vitamin C. It's something that your guinea pigs can't produce naturally and the result can be lameness, loss of teeth, rough coat, loss of hair, pain on handling and anorexia. So you must be absolutely sure your pets' diet compensates - check that the nugget food you're feeding them has added vitamin C. There are extremely high levels of protected vitamin C in Burgess Excel Tasty Nuggets for Guinea Pigs. Incidentally, this is why you should never feed your guinea pigs on rabbit food - there's nowhere near enough vitamin C in it for a guinea pig's needs.

General problems

Abscesses - guinea pigs are very susceptible to abscesses which can be caused by knocks or fights.

Skin complaints - these are very common, particularly mange, which is caused by a mite burrowing under the skin. Look for the symptoms: little raised spots which are itchy and cause your pet to scratch, and that leads to scabs and loss of hair. Always see your vet for a correct diagnosis and treatment.



Health checks

Every guinea pig is different, and it's good to get to know how. Once you're familiar with your pets' normal habits and behaviour, it will be easier to spot when they're ill.

You can help to maintain your pets' good health by learning to do some simple health checks every week. It's a good way to increase the bond between you, and these quick and easy checks are best done when your guinea pig is feeling comfortable and relaxed – you might find that an Excel Nature Snack helps.

And never forget: if in doubt, always consult your vet immediately.



Ears

Gently look inside and make sure they're clean and free from mites and fleas.



Eyes

Make sure their eyes are clear and shiny. Dull, swollen eyes are often a sign of illness and can lead to blindness.



Teeth

Check to make sure there isn't any excessive drooling which can be a sign of dental problems. Be careful with this health check: your pet might not be comfortable with having their mouth inspected and may bite.



Fur

Gently feel and look to check that there are no bald patches, no signs of mites or fleas and no injuries.



Feet

Gently hold and feel the feet to make sure your pet hasn't injured themselves. Check their claws too – they need to be clipped to keep them at a safe length; your vet can do this for you or show you how to.



Weight

Weigh your pet on a regular basis to see that they are maintaining a constant weight that is healthy for their age. Regular visits to your vet will tell you what their weight should be. Watching the scales is important – obesity is a serious illness that can lead to other health problems.