

GUINEA PIGS – HOUSING & HANDLING

HANDLING-RESTRAINT

Guinea pigs rarely violently struggle when they are being picked up but often make their "squeal of protest" which sounds pig-like to many. The guinea pig to be lifted should be approached with two hands. One is placed under the guinea pig's chest and abdomen and the other supports its hindquarters. One of the most desirable features of guinea pigs as pets is that they rarely bite when being handled or restrained. One reference indicates that only one in four hundred will bite under these circumstances.

HOUSING

Proper housing is a major factor in the maintenance of healthy guinea pigs. The psycho-social well-being of the animals must be a primary consideration. Guinea pigs can be housed within enclosures made of wire, stainless steel, durable plastic, or glass. The latter three materials are preferred because they resist corrosion. Wood and similar materials should not be included in the construction of enclosures because they are

difficult to clean and these materials cannot withstand the destructive gnawing of the occupant(s). Furthermore, the enclosure must be free of sharp edges and other potential hazards.

The enclosure must be roomy enough to allow the resident(s) to pursue normal activities and breeding activity, if the latter is desired. One reference recommends at least 100 square inches of floor area per adult "pig", whereas breeding guinea pigs should be allowed 180 square inches per animal.

The enclosure can be open at the top provided that its sides are at least 7 to 8 inches high. Male guinea pigs (especially breeding males) will require the sides of their enclosures to be at least 10 inches high. They tend to be more rambunctious.

Guinea pigs should not be housed on wire mesh. Guinea pigs housed for long periods on wire tend to develop serious injuries to the bottoms of their feet (see section on Foot Pad Infections). Furthermore, broken legs are quite common when guinea pigs fall through the mesh. This is most often a problem with guinea pigs that have not been reared on wire mesh, and occurs soon after they have been introduced onto it. Enclosures that provide solid flooring and an adequate supply of a preferred bedding are the best for pet guinea pigs. They should be easy to clean, well lit, and adequately ventilated (see Appendix for preferred temperature and relative humidity ranges).

Bedding must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust-free and easy to replace. Shredded paper, wood shavings (not pine or cedar), and processed corn cob are preferred bedding materials. Sawdust should be avoided even though it meets the aforementioned criteria. This material tends to collect within the external genitalia of male "pigs", forming an impaction. Rarely does this impaction interfere with urination, but it may inhibit successful breeding.

Guinea pigs seem most comfortable when they are spared exposure to excessive noise, needless excitement and confusion and other similar or perceived stresses. Sudden environmental changes should also be prevented.

Guinea pigs exhibit two types of reactions when startled by a loud noise, sudden movement, or strange environment. They may "freeze" completely motionless (for up to 20 minutes) or panic. The latter reaction involves erratic running and leaping, often accompanied with shrill squealing. Groups of guinea pigs will stampede in a circle, often trampling the younger residents within the enclosure.

Visual security (a place into or under which the resident(s) can retreat when frightened) should always be provided. Rectangular enclosures and the provision of barriers within them will also reduce the tendency to stampede and circle.

HYGIENE

The frequency with which the enclosure is cleaned will depend on its design, the materials out of which it is made and the number of guinea pigs that reside within it. As a general rule of thumb, however, the enclosure and all cage "furniture" should be cleaned and disinfected once weekly.



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The food and water containers should receive cleaning and disinfection once daily. We suggest that more than one set of containers be maintained and the "used" set be washed in a dishwasher, if possible. A vigorous scrubbing of the enclosure and "furniture" with hot water and soap and a thorough rinse should be followed by the use of a disinfectant (Virkon). Vinegar is often required to remove the scale deposited by the crystalline urine of guinea pigs.