



ANIMAL ANTICS

GUINEA PIGS AS PETS

Guinea pigs are not pigs at all, despite their name! The scientific name for the guinea pig is *Cavia porcellus*, and *porcellus* means “little pig” in Latin. This is also why you may hear of them being referred to as ‘Cavies’. They are members of the rodent family, which includes rats, mice, hamsters and squirrels. Guinea pigs originate from the Andean region of South America where they are still kept today as a source of food.

- A male guinea pig is called a **Boar**
- A female guinea pig is called a **Sow**
- Baby guinea pigs are generally called **Pups**
- Guinea pigs can have a lifespan of **3-8 years**

Guinea pigs are very popular pets because of their availability, docile temperaments, tendency not to bite or scratch when handled, and relatively clean habits. There are lots of different breeds of Guinea pig and they come in lots of colours and fur textures.

Guinea pigs have an unusual metabolic quirk, shared with human beings and marmosets but no other mammals. They are unable to manufacture Vitamin C from their food and it must, therefore, be present in their diet if a deficiency is not to occur. In addition to a prepared food (guinea pig mix or bran mash), guinea pigs will readily eat a wide variety of greenstuff and vegetables. Broccoli and other brassicas, and spinach all contain relatively high levels of vitamin C. Spinach is especially useful in the winter, when other sources of greenfood, such as dandelion leaves are hard to find. Root vegetables such as carrots can also be offered regularly. Like rabbits, guinea pigs rely heavily on bacteria and protozoa in their large intestine to break down plant material, consuming their own droppings to obtain maximum nutritional benefit from their food.

Guinea pigs are sociable and, therefore, best provided with company, especially if the owner is away during the day or the guinea pig is to be kept outside. The most natural companion for any pet guinea pig is always another guinea pig.

Suggested combinations are:

- A boar and a sow can be kept together if the boar is neutered.
- Sows will live happily together if introduced at a young age/carefully introduced at an older age.
- Male guinea pigs kept together will usually fight once sexually mature, although neutered boars can live happily together.

Guinea pigs should NOT be housed with rabbits for the following reasons:

1. Guinea pigs in the same hutch/run as rabbits may be bullied and seriously injured.
2. Guinea pigs have different dietary requirements and different means of communicating.

Guinea pigs need lots of love and attention and need to be handled very gently so as not to injure them. They need clean housing and plenty of healthy food. Although generally easy to keep and usually healthy animals, they do need the usual check-ups with the vet and some home grooming too.

If you are considering getting a guinea pig as a pet, then why not contact a few animal welfare charities that may already have guinea pigs that desperately need re-homing.

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01342 851333 / 07974 728967

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