



## GUINEA PIGS

### Diet and Care Recommendations

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

The guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*) was first domesticated in 2000 BC for food by mountain tribes in the Andean region of South America. They continue to be a food source in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Guinea pigs are large rodents. They can live for up to 8 years, although the average life span is 5 years. Females reach sexual maturity at 6 weeks old; males at 9 weeks. Guinea pigs have only two nipples; however, the average litter size is 3-4 young.

Guinea pigs cannot synthesize vitamin C, also known as ascorbic acid. Ascorbic acid is required to synthesize collagen, which anchors teeth tightly in their sockets. Insufficient intake of vitamin C can lead to a deficiency disease called scurvy. Vitamin C deficiency can cause a rough hair coat, increased susceptibility to infections, and serious dental problems including malocclusions and tooth loss.<sup>1</sup>



#### DIET

**Hay:** Guinea pigs should have access to timothy hay at all times. Pregnant, lactating, or growing guinea pigs can be offered alfalfa hay as well.

**Vegetables:** Offer leafy greens daily that are rich in vitamin C. Good choices include collard greens, mustard greens, dandelion greens, chard, kale, parsley, and bok choy. Avoid spinach in large quantities. Romaine and iceberg lettuce should be avoided as these do not offer adequate nutritional value. Decrease the amount of leafy greens offered if it causes diarrhea, gas, or abdominal pain.

**Pellets:** Offer  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup or less daily. Use timothy-based pellets that are formulated specifically for guinea pigs (we recommend Oxbow brand). Alfalfa pellets are okay for growing guinea pigs but adults should be switched to timothy pellets. DO NOT feed seeds, nuts, dairy, or meat. Guinea pigs are strict herbivores.

**Fruit:** Occasional. Strawberries, tomatoes, mangos, and oranges are rich in vitamin C. Be careful when feeding fruit; in large amounts, fruit can cause abdominal pain, gas, and diarrhea.

**Vitamin C Supplementation:** Adult guinea pigs require 10-15mg of vitamin C daily. Pregnant, lactating, or growing guinea pigs need at least 30mg daily.<sup>1</sup> Choose at least two of the following daily supplements to give to your guinea pig in addition to offering fresh greens and pellets formulated for guinea pigs. Vitamin C is water soluble, so excess vitamin C is easily eliminated in the urine.

- a) Chewable children's vitamin C tablets: Available in 25mg or 100mg tablets. If using the 25mg tablet, give one tablet daily. If using the 100mg tablets, give  $\frac{1}{4}$  tablet daily.
- b) Oxbow vitamin C tablets: 50mg tablets. Give  $\frac{1}{2}$  tablet daily.
- c) Children's vitamin C drops: Available in concentration of 250mg per teaspoon. Give  $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp daily over food or directly by mouth.

- d) Guinea pig vitamin C drops. Place the recommended dose in drinking water. Change water daily. Make sure your guinea pig is still drinking the water after supplement is added!

## ENVIRONMENT

Guinea pigs should be kept in a cage that provides them with plenty of space to move around and hide. Provide at least one hiding box as guinea pigs like to hide when scared. Some guinea pigs enjoy playing with small toys, like balls with bells inside. Supervise your guinea pig when playing with toys, as parts may be ingested which can lead to gastrointestinal problems.

**Cage:** Mesh or wire bottom cages are NOT recommended because it is easy for guinea pigs to get their toes or toenails stuck between the wires, causing injury. However, if using this type of cage, make sure to cover the mesh areas with cardboard or towels.

**Substrate:** Use paper-based bedding such as Carefresh or Yesterday's News. Don't use cedar or pine shavings. They contain volatile oils that can cause skin and respiratory irritation, and changes in liver function. Aspen shavings are okay but not recommended.

**Moisture:** Provide a water bottle or bowl at all times and change the water daily.

## MEDICAL CARE

Bring guinea pigs in once a year for a health check. We recommend spaying females as a preventative measure against ovarian and uterine ailments. We recommend neutering males to decrease the chances of health problems associated with sperm plugs.<sup>2</sup> Neutering can also reduce aggression and scent marking.

### Common Illnesses:

- a) **Cystic ovaries:** Females only. Symptoms include loss of hair, reddish discharge from vagina. Treatment involves spaying.
- b) **Dental disease:** Symptoms include change in appetite from hard foods to soft foods, decreased appetite, small and/or soft stools, drooling and runny eyes. Diagnosis requires a detailed oral exam which often requires anesthesia. Though not curable, it is treatable with regular tooth trims.
- c) **Gastric stasis:** This can be caused by a reaction to abdominal (stomach and intestines) pain; can be caused by a change in diet or overfeeding fruit. Symptoms include loss of appetite, no stool production, and rapid breathing. This condition can escalate very quickly, so guinea pigs exhibiting any of these behaviors should be taken to a veterinarian right away.
- d) **Mites:** Symptoms include hair loss, itching. Diagnosis is by performing a skin cytology.
- e) **Scurvy:** Caused by insufficient levels of vitamin C. Symptoms include rough hair coat, hair loss, anorexia, diarrhea, lameness, increased susceptibility to bacterial infection, delayed healing, malocclusions, tooth loss, lethargy, and loss of muscle tone. If you think your guinea pig may have scurvy, call your veterinarian right away.

**Bring your guinea pig to a veterinarian right away if it is exhibiting any of the following symptoms:**

**Loss of appetite**

**Diarrhea or soft stool**

**No stool production**

**Rapid breathing or difficulty breathing**

**Extreme lethargy**

1. Queensberry, Katherine E. and Carpenter, James W. "Musculoskeletal Diseases: Scurvy." Ferrets, Rabbits, and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery. St Louis: Saunders, Second Edition. 251.
2. Lejniaks, Daniel V. "Urethral Plug in a Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*)." *Journal of Exotic Pet Medicine*. Saunders, Vol 16, No 3, July 2007. 183-185.

## High Vitamin C Foods

(Per 1 cup chopped)

<b>Vegetable</b>	<b>Vitamin C (grams)</b>
Yellow peppers	341
Red peppers	312
Green peppers	147
Broccoli	82
Kale	80
Brussel sprouts	75
Green peas	58
Cauliflower	47
Cassava	43
Chicory greens	43
Mustard greens	39
Turnip greens	33
Cabbage	29
Turnips	27
Parsnips	23
Okra	21
Dandelion greens	19
Acorn squash	15
Collard greens	13
Carrots	12
Beet greens	12
Swiss chard	11
Loose leaf lettuce	10
Celery	9
Beets	7
Butterhead lettuce	5
Cucumber (peeled)	4