General Guinea Pig Care

The Facts
Guinea pigs are small rodents that originated in South America, where they are commonly known as a cavy. There are three main breeds: English or common (short, straight, and fine hair), Abyssinian (rough, wiry hair in rosettes or whorls), and Peruvian (long, straight, and silky hair), although various crossbreeds exist.

Feeding
Timothy hay, which, along with fresh, clean water, should be made available to a guinea pig at all times, as this is the basis (approximately 80%) of their diet. Hay helps keep the guinea pig’s teeth short and their gastrointestinal tracts working efficiently.

In addition to hay, guinea pigs should eat 1/8 cup of guinea pig pellets every day. These provide the cavy with essential nutrients that they cannot get otherwise, such as vitamin C.

Guinea pigs should also eat somewhere between a handful and 1 cup of fresh fruits and vegetables each day. Some recommended veggies include: leafy greens like collard greens, kale, spinach, and parsley, as well as other vegetables such as green and red peppers, carrots, radish tops, and peas. Vegetables to avoid include: iceberg lettuce, potatoes, cabbage, and broccoli. Guinea pigs should eat a few types of vegetables regularly and new veggies should be introduced into the diet gradually to avoid diarrhea, bloat, and an upset tummy.

Fruits should only comprise about 5% of the cavy’s daily dietary intake. About one slice of fruit a day is enough. Recommended fruits include: apples, strawberries, blueberries, grapes, and oranges.

Fruits and veggies should be fed to guinea pigs in small, bite-sized portions throughout the day (as opposed to all at once). Any produce not eaten after a few hours should be removed and replaced with fresh options.

Living Quarters
Guinea pigs are social animals that prefer to live in small groups. Any group of female guinea pigs will likely become great friends, but it is harder to get adult males to bond unless they are from the same litter. You should not keep male and females together, as guinea pigs multiply quickly.

A cavy that lives indoors should be kept in a solid-bottom cage with a wire cover. Never use an aquarium, as that enclosure will not provide adequate ventilation. At the very minimum, each cage should provide at least 4 square feet of space per guinea pig, although the larger the cage, the better for the guinea pig.

Cages should be kept away from drafts and extreme temperatures in a room that is maintained between 60 and 80°F. They should be lined with bedding made of aspen or hardwood shavings, timothy hay, or processed paper products. Do not use cedar or pine chips as bedding, as they can be toxic for the animal.

Cavies also like to have a cave to sleep in, such as a medium-sized flower pot or a covered sleeping box. Indoor guinea pigs should be taken out of their enclosures regularly to exercise and socialize, and in warm weather, they should be exposed to direct sunlight for 20 minutes at least 2-3 times per week.

Behavior
Guinea pigs are usually very expressive, vocal animals that will whistle or grunt when they’re excited, and squeak with delight when they see their favorite people enter the room. They are generally gentle and not prone to biting, but they will nip at threatening animals or people that are mishandling them. To help a cavy get used to you – and to being handled -- you should build a rapport slowly by hand feeding her small treats in the cage. To properly handle a guinea pig, pick her up with one hand supporting her bottom and the other over her back.

Maintenance
Soiled bedding, droppings, and stale food should be removed from the cage every day. At least once a week, the bottom of the cage should be scrubbed with warm water and mild soap and then allowed to dry before putting in fresh bedding.

The cavy should be brushed regularly to help maintain a clean coat and remove any tangles or loose hair. Long-haired guinea pigs need to be brushed daily to prevent knots.

Health and Wellness
Guinea pigs should have time every day to play and exercise in a small room or enclosed area that does not have any openings through which they could escape. They should always be supervised when they’re out of their cages because they will chew on anything that they find.

Cavies enjoy simple toys like cardboard tubes, empty oatmeal or coffee containers with smoothed edges, and bricks or rocks for climbing. Guinea pig’s teeth are constantly growing, so they need chew toys that will help wear down the teeth. Recommended items include: branches and twigs that haven’t been sprayed with pesticides and/or small pieces of unpainted, untreated wood.

Common signs of illness in a guinea pig include sneezing, crusty eyes, dirty ears, severe diarrhea, hair loss, weight loss, noticeable change in behavior, and bloody or gritty urine. If a guinea pig is showing any of these symptoms, take her to a veterinarian immediately.