

COMMERCE AND EMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT

GUIDANCE FOR THE WELFARE OF PET GUINEA PIGS

MADE UNDER SECTION 13(6) OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE (GUERNSEY) ORDINANCE, 2012

GUIDANCE – FOOD AND WATER

Food

Guinea pigs are herbivores and need a balanced diet high in digestible fibre:

- a) good quality hay or grass should form the bulk of the diet, and
- b) fresh greens and root vegetables (such as carrots), should be given daily.

Guinea pigs cannot make vitamin C and it is therefore essential that they have adequate vitamin C in their diet to prevent illness. The need for vitamin C must be met by feeding fresh vegetables, a proprietary guinea pig feed and/or vitamin C supplements. Guinea pig food does not provide adequate vitamin C.

Guinea pigs may eat selectively (i.e. eating only parts of a food mix) when fed a mixed concentrate. Providing a plain pelleted feed prevents such selective feeding.

Food should be provided in a heavy dish to prevent tipping and spillage.

Water

Clean fresh drinking water must be available to all animals at all times and all water containers should be refilled daily.

Water should be provided in water bottles with a sipper tube and ball bearing. Other containers, such as bowls, may be tipped over and may become contaminated with bedding and droppings.

Bottles must be checked in cold weather to make sure that water has not frozen.

GUIDANCE – LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Housing

Accommodation must:

- a) be escape proof and vermin and predator proof,
- b) include a shelter area of at least one third of the total accommodation space that is large enough to allow every guinea pig that is accommodated to shelter at the same time,

- c) in addition to the space provided as a shelter, provide a guinea pig with enough space to:
 - i) exercise (a guide is 0.9 m² of floor space per adult guinea pig),
 - ii) allow an adult guinea pig to stand on its back legs without its head touching the roof,
 - iii) allow a guinea pig to lie fully outstretched in any direction without touching the sides of its accommodation and to turn around unimpeded,
- d) have a floor of solid construction (not wire mesh),
- e) be damp-proof and draught-proof, but well ventilated,
- f) be free from hazards such as sharp objects and constructed with materials that are not hazardous to guinea pigs or which have not been painted or treated with substances that are hazardous to guinea pigs,
- g) ideally provide natural light in the living enclosure, but also provide areas of protection from direct sunlight, and
- h) allow continuous access to food and water.

Any wire used that is used should be of strong galvanised mesh of a gauge that prevents the feet and legs of guinea pigs from becoming trapped and excludes vermin. Wire mesh ½” x ½” (13mm x 13mm) and 19 standard wire gauge (SWG) to 14 SWG (1.016 mmØ to 1.626 mmØ) is acceptable in most situations but where mice are pests wire mesh of ¼” x ¼” (6mm x 6mm) and 23 SWG (0.610 mmØ) will be required.

Outdoor hutches must be of robust, weatherproof construction and raised off the ground to prevent rising damp and must be sited to provide protection from extremes of weather, draughts, fumes (such as car exhausts and chemicals), heat and the midday sun.

A good overhang of a hutch roof will reduce dampness to the sides and rear of a hutch and limit the ingress of rain at the front.

Outdoor Runs

Guinea pigs benefit from access to a run for exercise.

Ideally a guinea pig should have daily access to an exercise run that is separate from its living enclosure. A run must be of solid construction and may be covered with strong galvanised mesh on the top and/or sides as described above. However some enclosed protection from wind, rain and sun must be provided (this may be in the form of a box or pipe tunnel within

the run). The bottom of the run must not be wired because it prevents digging which is a natural behaviour but it may be necessary to prevent escape. If you prefer your guinea pig not to dig your lawn you should provide it with a digging pit in the form of a large litter tray filled with earth.

As a guide, suitable dimensions for an outdoor run are 180cm long, 100cm wide and 60cm high.

The run should be secured to the ground if there is any possibility of dogs or other predators gaining access to guinea pigs.

Bedding Materials

Bedding materials must provide insulation and should consist of a layer of absorbent material such as good quality soft white wood shavings, soft meadow hay, shredded paper or synthetic fleece fabric. Good quality hay or straw should be provided on top of the absorbent layer.

Any bedding must be dust free to avoid respiratory problems and must not have been treated with chemicals which are hazardous to guinea pigs. Wood shavings or dust extracted saw dust must not originate from wood treated with chemicals which are hazardous to the health of guinea pigs.

Cold Conditions

Guinea pigs cope well in cold weather, but do not tolerate damp. They must be provided with abundant clean, dry bedding materials and additional protection such as insulation of sleeping areas and hutch covers during the winter. Outdoor hutches may be moved to an indoor area or a sheltered area.

If outdoor hutches are moved into sheds or outbuildings they must be ventilated to avoid build up of humidity leading to condensation.

Hot Conditions

Guinea pigs are extremely prone to heat stress.

Housing for guinea pigs must not be placed in direct sunlight as this can lead to overheating. If temperatures are likely to exceed 24°C, precautions to cool accommodation must be taken, such as:

- a) moving it to a shaded area,
- b) using air conditioning or a fan in a shed/outbuilding,
- c) covering it with a wet cloth or sacking (with the edge in a bucket of water or the cloth or sacking regularly wetted), or
- d) placing frozen plastic water bottles (sealed) within bedding.

In hot, still summer weather, when air circulation is low, regular cleaning of cages is necessary to prevent the build up of ammonia from urine and faeces.

Light

During daylight hours, light may be provided to exercise and sleeping areas so that all parts are clearly visible. A proportion of this light should be natural light.

There must always be adequate light available to inspect guinea pigs.

Guinea pigs housed indoors should be provided with a minimum of 10-12 hours light per day.

Noise

Guinea pigs are easily startled and may injure themselves if they panic. Hutches must be sited so that guinea pigs are not exposed to sudden loud noises.

Enrichment of the Environment

Pipes or platforms to climb on as well as other enrichment devices will add interest to a guinea pig environment. In addition to the nutritional value to a guinea pig, hay provides a form of environmental enrichment, as guinea pigs enjoy burrowing in large quantities of loose hay.

GUIDANCE - HEALTH

Monitoring Health

Guinea pigs should be observed at least daily to determine whether they are:

- a) eating and drinking normally,
- b) urinating and defecating normally,
- c) expressing normal inquisitive behaviour,
- d) able to move about freely, and
- e) have a normal coat and are not scratching or itching excessively.

Parasites

Guinea pigs may be affected by skin parasites (in particular lice and mange mites). Some skin infestations such as fungal infections especially in the region of the face are more complex to treat.

Guinea pigs must be treated in accordance with the recommendations of a veterinary surgeon or in accordance with the instructions of the manufacturer of a particular product.

Injuries

It is common for guinea pigs to be poked in the eye with hay or for hay or for fibrous materials (commonly hayseeds) to become stuck on the surface of the eye or to become lodged between the eye ball and eyelids. If the injury is not too severe any offending material may be gently removed by owners. If the eye looks uncomfortable and the eye lids are not fully open the guinea pig should be examined by a veterinary surgeon.

Torn ears and cuts through fighting may occur after introducing new guinea pigs to a group. Treatment by washing and keeping clean with a dilute salt solution will be enough to aid healing of minor injuries.

In the case of any severe injuries, the advice of a veterinary surgeon must be sought.

Illness

Abscesses may occasionally occur and may burst. They should be treated by twice daily bathing with warm dilute salt solution but veterinary advice must be sought if healing is slow or interrupted.

Ruttling is an upper or lower respiratory noise occasionally made by a guinea pig. It may be just a nervous symptom that remains with an animal for life, but in may also be the first sign of an acute respiratory infection. Veterinary advice should be sought if this condition occurs.

Compaction of the anus may be seen in older males and an affected animal should have their anus cleaned with warm dilute salt solution every few days to restore normal bowl habits.

Diarrhoea or scouring is usually the result of dietary mismanagement, but may be a symptom of infection. Affected animals may deteriorate quickly and veterinary advice should be sought if the condition does not respond to dietary adjustment such as feeding hay and water only for a period of a few days.

Veterinary advice must be obtained if a guinea pig appears to be ill or in pain and the cause is not clear, or if initial first aid treatment is not effective.

Care of Nails

Overgrown toe nails should be clipped leaving at least 5 mm of dead nail covering the “pink” living nail structure called the ‘quick’. If you are uncertain how to undertake this you must seek veterinary advice.

Care of Teeth

A guinea pig has chisel-like incisor teeth which grow continually and which it has to keep to a uniform length by regular gnawing each day. Guinea pigs must be provided with something to gnaw on, such as gnawing blocks / logs / fruit tree branches. Any wood provided for gnawing must not have been treated with chemicals which are hazardous to guinea pigs.

Front teeth, incisors, should be regularly checked and if an owner is concerned that they are overgrown they should seek veterinary advice.

Quarantine

A quarantine period of 14 days is desirable for any new guinea pigs before they are introduced to resident guinea pigs in a stud or new home.

Guinea Pigs that show signs of a contagious disease must be isolated from other guinea pigs immediately.

Hygiene

Guinea pigs are clean animals, but their accommodation, food and water containers must be cleaned weekly and more frequently if necessary.

Guinea pigs can develop skin, particularly foot, problems from damp or unsuitable flooring and bedding. Urine, in particular, causes scalding of the skin.

The following management is necessary:

- a) bedding must be topped up each day,
- b) bedding must be changed weekly or as soon as it becomes noticeably damp from water spillages or driving rain,
- c) food bowls and water bottles must be cleaned weekly and rinsed well if disinfectants or detergents are used, and
- d) uneaten green food must be removed daily.

Feed should be stored in vermin proof containers.

Handling

Guinea pigs can become very tame if handled calmly and correctly.

A guinea pig should be lifted gently by placing one hand underneath to support the whole its body. It should be carried with one hand underneath the body and the other hand resting on the its shoulders.

GUIDANCE - BEHAVIOUR

Guinea pigs display a wide range of behaviours including foraging, hiding and burrowing in bedding and they are timid and will be easily disturbed by sudden noise or movement.

Companionship

Guinea pigs are gregarious by nature and benefit from being kept in pairs or groups, especially if they are without human contact during the day.

Unless intended for breeding purposes, guinea pigs housed together should be of the same sex or one should be neutered as a mixed pair will breed. Male guinea pigs may fight with each other, but aggression between the opposite sexes or amongst a group of females is uncommon. To prevent fighting, males kept in groups should have been raised together since weaning.

Care should be taken to monitor for aggression and to separate individuals if necessary.

Guinea pigs must not be kept with rabbits or other animals as bullying may occur and there is a risk of cross infection of diseases.

Territorial behaviour

Adult guinea pigs may exhibit territorial behaviour. New additions should be introduced on neutral territory, for example, a freshly cleaned cage or exercise run after a quarantine period of 14 days.

Adult boars may be aggressive towards other boars. Fighting can lead to distress and injury and is usually preceded by chattering of teeth. However, boars may often accept the company of a newly weaned boar.

A boar may be castrated to enable it to live with a group of sows and castration will prevent unwanted pregnancy and excess young. However, it will not improve the temperament of boars or reduce fighting.

Fighting animals should be separated and provided with individual accommodation.

GUIDANCE - BREEDING

Breeding guinea pigs should be planned and owners should inform themselves of what is required and ensure that there is a home or a market for the offspring.

Neutering

If an owner does not wish to breed a guinea pig, ideally it should be neutered.

Selection of Breeding Stock

A female guinea pig, or sow, must not be selected for breeding unless it is a minimum of 6 months of age, an adequate size (for most breeds this is approximately 700g) and in good health and physical condition. A male guinea pig, or boar, should not be used for breeding until they are a minimum of 4 months of age and weigh approximately 650g.

Females guinea pigs should not be mated before 6 months of age. While guinea pigs may remain fertile for up to four years, the optimal breeding life ends at 2 years of age. Generally, litter sizes decrease and reproductive complications begin to increase after 18-28 months of age. A female guinea pig should not be bred for the first time when it is over the age of 12 months.

Care of Pregnant Sows

Pregnant females should be separated from other guinea pigs late in the last trimester (last 3 weeks) of pregnancy and housed together with their young until weaning. The gestation period of guinea pigs is 63–68 days. A secure, private place for raising young, such as a nest or secluded, sheltered den area, must be provided

Exercise is important for pregnant sows to prevent pregnancy toxemia and to maintain body condition. Exercise can be encouraged by keeping the sow in a spacious pen. However, towards the end of pregnancy when a female may be double her normal body weight, food and water should be kept in close proximity to a sow.

Pregnant or nursing sows require a diet adequate in protein, vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium.

The optimal temperature range for housing breeding guinea pigs is 16-24°C. Temperatures in this range should be maintained and controlled to prevent undue fluctuations which may cause unnecessary stress and place pups at risk of fatal chilling.

Handling of pregnant sows should be kept to a minimum.

Care of Young

Guinea pigs have strong maternal instincts and usually make good mothers. If the pups do not appear to be thriving or have not been observed suckling, advice should be sought on supplementary feeding.

Guinea pig pups can be weaned at 3 to 4 weeks and moved to new homes at 8 weeks, provided that they:

- a) appear to be fit, healthy and free from any signs of illness,
- b) have attained a minimum body weight of 250g
- c) are properly weaned (eating solid food and able to drink from a water bottle).

It is important that female offspring be weaned by 21 days of age and isolated from boars, because they may come into season by 4-5 weeks of age and may breed.

Young boars become sexually active at an early age, and they should be removed from their mother and female siblings by the age of 4 weeks to prevent the production of accidental litters.

GUIDANCE – EXHIBITING GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs that are exhibited must be at least 3 months, in good health and free from injuries or skin parasites. Pregnant guinea pigs must not be exhibited.

Guinea pigs that are exhibited should be provided with a suitable, hay and a source of water. This may be a water bottle or fresh vegetables with high moisture content.

To reduce stress it is essential that the guinea pig has been handled regularly prior to being shown.

GUIDANCE - TRANSPORTING GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs that are transported should be in good health and sick or injured animals should only be transported to a veterinary surgeon for the purpose of treatment or diagnosis.

Guinea pigs are prone to heat stroke and should not be transported in temperatures above 24°C unless air conditioning is available in a vehicle.

Cardboard boxes may get hotter than properly constructed carriers, which should have wire mesh or slats for ventilation. A cat basket is a suitable container as long as it has a solid base. If transporting more than one guinea pig at a time in warm weather, it is better to transport each animal in its own compartment of the carrier, even if they normally live together.

Carrying boxes or containers must be large enough to allow a guinea pig to stand up, turn around and lie down and must be ventilated. They must contain bedding and hay.

Boxes or containers should not be packed in the vehicle in a manner which compromises ventilation, placed in direct sunlight or next to the vehicle's heater and should not be carried in the boot of a saloon car.

Water bottles are unsuitable for use when travelling. On longer journeys fruit or vegetables with high moisture content should be provided and guinea pigs should be checked at regular intervals, especially in hot weather.

Food bowls or other heavy unsecured items must not be placed in boxes or containers as these may cause injury in the event of an accident or sharp deceleration of the vehicle.

A guinea pig should not be left unattended in a vehicle in hot weather unless the environment within the vehicle is maintained below 24°C air temperature in the shade.

This guidance is given by the Department with a view to securing the welfare of pet guinea pigs. It is additional to the Welfare Recommendations set out in the **Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pet Guinea Pigs** made by the Department and available at [insert link etc.]. A breach of the Code may be relied upon in Court proceedings.