

Are Guinea Pigs Right for Your Family?

by Charity Dennington, GPSR Team

Guinea pigs are fascinating little creatures each with their own unique personality. Although they can make wonderful family pets they are delicate animals so they should not be handled by small children without close adult supervision. It's wonderful for an older child to assist with care, but an adult should always have the ultimate responsibility of ensuring these precious pets receive the care they need.

What do Guinea Pigs Require?

Space: Guinea pigs need room to run around and popcorn (a little jump they do when they are happy). It's so much fun to watch piggies zoom around their cage. Our cage requirements are at least a Midwest or 2 x 4 C&C cage for 1-2 Guinea pigs. For groups of 3 females you would need two connecting Midwest cages or a 2 x 5 C&C cage. For a pair of males bigger is always better and gives you a greater chance of long term success.

A Friend: Guinea pigs are herd animals and will live a longer, happier life with a friend. Occasionally, there is a piggy who can't get along with others. In these cases it is still a good idea to have another piggy in an adjoining cage so they can still have someone to talk "piggy" to and they never have to feel completely alone.

Accessories:

- 1) Hidey: Guinea pigs love to hide under things. Since they are prey animals it makes them feel safer from predators. You need at least one per piggy. It can be a plastic pigaloo, a fleece house, a straw house or even a cardboard box with a doorway cut out that you just replace when it gets dirty or chewed up.
- 2) Water bottle: Make sure it is leak proof
- 3) Bowls: For veggies and pellets - The rescue uses plastic ones from the dollar tree for veggies and heavier non tip ones for the pellets.
- 4) Bedding: You can use fleece, paper or kiln-dried pine (never use cedar or newspaper because it is toxic for Guinea pigs) At the rescue we use fleece which we wash and change weekly. It costs more upfront, but saves money in the long run. It's also better for the environment and for your piggies' tender feet.
- 5) Chew Toys: Old fashioned wooden blocks, chew sticks, and rattan balls are a few toys you can give your piggy to keep their constantly growing teeth in excellent shape. Any natural wood will work except cedar.

Diet: Guinea pigs need 24/7 access to hay, 1/8 cup daily of plain Guinea pig pellets (no unhealthy seeds or colored bits), 1 cup of vegetables, and fresh filtered water daily. Feeding Guinea pigs is one of the most fun parts of owning these adorable animals.

NOTES: Most people feed Timothy Hay, but a small percentage of people are allergic to it. If you have bad allergies you may want to consider using Orchard Grass. Also, if you have piggies under 6 months old feed the Young Guinea Pig food.

Temperature: 65 - 75 degrees

Time: Piggies poop a lot. Thankfully, since they are herbivores their poop doesn't have much odor. Fleece liners should be vacuumed daily, washed weekly. Other bedding will need to be scooped as it gets dirty and changed at least once a week.

You will also spend time cutting up veggies, washing water bottles, and hopefully getting lots of piggy cuddles. Guinea pigs should have their nails trimmed and ivermectin treatment applied every 4-6 weeks. The Guinea Pig Slave Rescue offers this service for free, but Linda can also teach you to do it yourself. I personally give my piggies a full health check monthly and weigh them and give them a quick look-over weekly. Weight is one of the best indicators of piggy health.

Vet: Although piggies don't need vaccinations, it's a good idea to have a vet in mind to use in case your piggy becomes sick.

What you don't need:

Hay rack - hay on the floor or in a tray allows them to utilize their foraging instincts

Hay ball - these are very dangerous, piggies can get their heads stuck in them

Snak Shack Tunnel - they eat them and the ingredients are not healthy

Harness and Exercise Balls - these are bad for their curved spines

Treats with yogurt, nuts or seeds, salt licks - these are not healthy for piggies

Vitamin C in their water - will change the taste and may cause the piggy to become dehydrated

What will a Guinea pig give to you?

Guinea pigs are prey animals and can be very fearful especially in new situations.

Given time, patience, and love most piggies will eventually become more and more tame. There is something so special about gaining the trust of these sweet creatures.

They are so gentle and will blossom in the right environment. Soon your piggy will likely wheek (a sound they make solely for humans) when you enter the room and run up to the side of the cage to beg for a treat. Some piggies enjoy sitting on their owner's laps during tv time. With their calm spirits they make great emotional support animals.

Before you visit the rescue I highly recommend watching Linda's video about finding your heart pig. When you arrive at the rescue hold several different piggies or sets of piggies so you can see different personality types. Eventually you will hold a piggy that just feels like you belong together.