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Guinea Pigs

Natural Habitat

Guinea pigs are members of the rodent family and are native to South America. They enjoy large spaces to run with plenty of cover to hide from predators.

Housing

Enclosures should have lots of room for animals to run around because they are very active and can run when startled. Provide many different hideouts for them, and make sure they are well protected from any aggressive pets in the household.

Temperature

Guinea pigs are also great outdoor pets. They can withstand very cold temperatures but are highly susceptible to heatstroke. They do not tolerate high temperatures and high-humidity climates.

Diet

- Guinea pigs are herbivores; their gastrointestinal (GI) tract is specifically evolved to utilize plant material. One of the most common (and preventable) causes of disease in guinea pigs is improper nutrition. A guinea pig's overall digestive health depends on a high-fiber diet. Fiber is critical in stimulating and maintaining GI motility. The best source of fiber for your guinea pig is grass hay. In addition to fresh water, hay should be made available to your guinea pig at all times.
- Your guinea pig's daily diet should consist of water, free choice hay, greens, and a small quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables. Always make changes to your guinea pig's diet slowly. As a guideline, offer only one new item per week. If your guinea pig develops soft stool or diarrhea after you offer a new fruit or vegetable, it should resolve within a day or two. If it does not, stop feeding that item. We do not recommend putting vitamins or mineral drops in the water because this can change the taste of the water, and the animal might refuse to drink.
 - *Hay.* Timothy or mixed grass hay is a healthier choice than alfalfa hay because alfalfa hay is high in calories and calcium. Hay should be fed free choice.
 - *Greens.* Offer a very small quantity of greens each day.
 - Offer a variety of greens to supply a balance of nutrients.
 - Alfalfa, radish, clover sprouts, basil, beet greens (tops), bok choy, broccoli (mostly leaves/stems), brussel sprouts, carrot, carrot tops, celery, cilantro, clover, collard greens, dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides), endive, escarole, green peppers, kale, mint, mustard

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

greens, pea pods (the flat edible kind), peppermint leaves, raddichio, radish tops, raspberry leaves, red leaf lettuce, romaine lettuce (no iceberg or light-colored leaf), spinach, watercress, wheat grass.

- Very dark green vegetables, such as spinach and kale, contain high calcium and should be offered less frequently.
- *Fresh fruits and vegetables.* Offer a small quantity (½ tablespoon) per day. These items are a much healthier choice than prepackaged treats.
 - Kiwi fruit, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, apple (no seeds or stems), pear, peach, papaya, pineapple, cactus fruit, melons, bean or alfalfa sprouts, green or red bell peppers, mango, pea pods (flat, NO peas), cherries, cranberries; edible flowers from the garden (organically grown and NOT from a florist) such as roses, nasturtiums, day lilies, pansies, and snap dragons; carrots, squash
- *Pellets.* Although convenient, they are not a necessary part of a pet guinea pig's diet. In addition, they are often high in calories, fat, and other additives that guinea pigs do not need. Many guinea pigs develop diarrhea or chronic soft stools if fed a diet high in pellets. If you wish to feed pellets, choose a brand with no less than 18% to 20% fiber that is low in protein, calories, and fat and does not contain seeds or other items.
- The Oxbow Company makes excellent diets for guinea pigs. Please refer to the handout we gave you for diet information. You can order guinea pig food directly from the Oxbow Company.
- Guinea pigs also require vitamin C supplementation. We recommend that you purchase a supplement and give one tablet once a day. The Oxbow Company also makes an excellent vitamin C supplement that you can purchase.

Behavior

In addition to a healthy diet, your guinea pig should receive daily exercise in a safe environment. Physical activity stimulates GI motility and helps to prevent boredom and some unwanted behaviors.

Lifespan

Wild guinea pigs usually live about 4 years. In captivity, they should reach about 8 years of age, if maintained well.

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Common Medical Conditions

- Most guinea pig medical conditions are caused by diet.
- A diet too low in fiber or too high in carbohydrates can lead to gastric stasis, microbial overgrowth, or enterotoxemia, which can lead to serious health problems for your guinea pig.
- A diet deficient in hay can contribute to dental disease. Guinea pig teeth grow continuously. The act of chewing helps maintain teeth at the proper height and shape. Dental spurs are sharp projections that can develop on the inside of the lower and the outside of the upper dental arcade. Spurs can cause injury to the cheeks or the tongue, which may lead to discomfort or difficulty eating.
- High levels of dietary fat increase risk of obesity-related problems and of arteriosclerosis.
- An improper diet may lead to problems in major body systems other than the GI tract, including the respiratory and urinary tracts. Too much protein increases the amount of ammonia in the urine; this may cause injury to the respiratory tract, predisposing to secondary infection. A diet that is high in calcium can cause "sludge" in the urinary bladder, stones anywhere in the urinary tract, and even calcification of soft tissues.

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