



Support for adopters

GUIDANCE FOR NEW GUINEA PIG OWNERS

Taking your new guinea pigs home

You've chosen your new guinea pigs and are raring to take them home, but before you take one step through the front door there are a few things you need to sort out to make sure your home is ready for your new pets.

Moving on

Make sure that you have an appropriate carrier for when you pick up your new pets from the RSPCA. The carrier should be secure and large enough for each of your guinea pigs to sit, turn around and lie down naturally in. Ideally transport companion guinea pigs (i.e. a bonded pair/group) together in the same carrier, provided it is large enough to allow them all to perform these normal behaviours comfortably. If you have to use separate carriers, place companion guinea pigs close to one another so they can see and smell each other, this will reassure them and help reduce the stress associated with travelling. Familiar smelling items, such as some used but clean hay/bedding from their home at the animal centre or branch, may also help them feel at ease while travelling to their new home. Do not mix unfamiliar animals for the purpose of travelling.

Make sure that your carrier is secure and made of a suitable material. Cardboard or wooden carriers are not suitable for rodents as, not only do they absorb urine and become damp; your pets could simply chew their way out of them! Cover the carrier to keep it dark but ensure that it is still well ventilated and line it with newspaper to absorb any urine. Make sure that your guinea pigs have access to water and hay during the journey. Provide water in a way that they are used to (e.g. bottle or bowl) and ensure it will not spill during transportation. Check your guinea pigs regularly, and give them frequent breaks, during long journeys.

It goes without saying that your guinea pigs won't thank you for bringing your dog along if you have one! This will really scare them. Take your new pets directly home.

Settling in

When you get your new pets home, it is best to leave them for 24 hours so they can get used to their new surroundings, though still provide food and water and check that they are behaving normally and aren't showing any signs of illness or injury. As your guinea pigs settle in, the best thing you can do to reassure your new pets is to be calm and patient. Make sure that they have constant access to safe hiding places within their accommodation so they can hide if feeling scared, and allow them to take things at their own pace. Remember that your guinea pigs don't know you or your lifestyle, so introduce different activities and people over a period of time, and always ensure you supervise any interactions with children.

Guinea pig housing should be located in a quiet, draught-free part of your home or garden, away from direct sunlight and areas where children play (unless they can be supervised). Housing should also be located away from the sight and smell of potential predators, such as foxes, birds of prey, ferrets and unfamiliar dogs and cats.

If your guinea pigs are going to live indoors, their home should be placed in a quiet area in the house, away from electrical equipment like TV and computers (as the noises from this equipment can disturb guinea pigs) and also away from other pets.

Your guinea pigs should have constant access to both their shelter and their exercise area. Make sure that there are no areas that your pets can escape from and that there are no hazardous plants in the area where

your guinea pigs will be. The temperature of the area should be monitored carefully to ensure guinea pigs do not become too hot or too cold. A temperature of 17-20°C is ideal. If your home is centrally heated, some areas may get too hot so think carefully about where to locate your guinea pigs' accommodation.

Their home and any areas they have access to (such as the garden) should also be secure, escape-proof and free from hazards (e.g. poisonous plants). If you are going to give your guinea pigs free access to your garden to explore and exercise, this should be done under supervision. Any areas that your guinea pigs have access to should also be guinea pig-proofed; this involves ensuring there are no hazards, so remove any hazardous plants and make sure that all electrical cables are covered or electrical items removed from these areas and cover or remove anything that you do not want chewed!

Home comforts

Your home will probably be very different to the animal centre/branch your pets were living in, including the guinea pigs' accommodation itself. The animal centre/branch will provide you with information about setting up your new guinea pigs' accommodation before you take them home, including information about suitable bedding and nesting materials.

Within their home, your guinea pigs will need space to exercise and places to hide, as well as somewhere warm, dry and quiet to sleep - providing a few resting places is important so they don't have to rest together if they don't want to. Make sure there is at least one shelter that is large enough for them all to rest in together too. The shelter should have multiple entrances/exits so no guinea pig gets trapped inside by another guinea pig.

Make sure there is plenty of horizontal space within the accommodation and provide plenty of boxes, tubes and tunnels to increase the complexity of the accommodation and allow your guinea pigs to behave normally and move around confidently.

Clean any areas where they choose to toilet at least once a day; the whole accommodation will need cleaning regularly.

Providing safe toys, items to chew and regular opportunities to play with people and with each other after the first day or so may also help your guinea pigs settle in. However, be observant. If the behaviour of your guinea pigs changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet.

Food and water

Changing the diet of your guinea pigs suddenly can cause an upset tummy so feed your guinea pigs with the diet they have been used to in order to reduce any risk of this. The most important part of your guinea pigs' diet is hay and/or grass and this should be available at all times. They should have also been fed some suitable vegetables and herbs, and a small amount of commercial guinea pig pellets – these provide essential nutrients including Vitamin C, which is essential to keep your pets happy and healthy. Information about their preferred foods and advice on feeding will be provided in the adoption pack you will be given when you come to collect your guinea pigs.

If you want to change your pets' diet to something else of your choice, do so gradually over at least 14 days, mixing a little of the new food with the old to gradually wean your guinea pigs onto the new diet. Suitable leafy green vegetables and herbs should be fed daily but introduce these slowly too. Only give root vegetables like carrots, or fruit such as apples, in small amounts as an occasional treat. Do not give your guinea pigs citrus fruits as these can be harmful for your pets.

As well as constant access to hay (and grass if possible) and a bottle or bowl of fresh clean water, guinea pigs should also be fed their daily, measured ration of pellets and greens in two meals per day (unless advised otherwise by a vet). If you want to change how frequently your guinea pigs are fed, do this gradually and always ask a vet if you're unsure.

Keeping busy

Your guinea pigs need and will enjoy lots of opportunities to exercise and explore, whether they are housed inside or outside, so make sure they have constant access from their main shelter to a secure exercise area. If you choose to keep your guinea pigs indoors, using a rodent exercise pen permanently attached to their main shelter is a great way to provide a secure area and you can put suitable objects in the pen to encourage your guinea pigs to explore. Guinea pigs like to tunnel so provide areas of deep hay, tunnels and tubes for them to explore. Guinea pigs are really clever too - training using positive reward based methods can help to improve the guinea pig/human bond, and will help keep them physically and mentally active.

Good company

Make sure that you keep a close eye on the behaviour of your guinea pigs, particularly as they settle in to your home. Although guinea pigs are sociable, fighting can still occur. Check your guinea pigs each day to make sure that one or other of them is not injured and needing veterinary attention. Be sure that any aggression between the guinea pigs is not becoming a problem, particularly in the initial time when they are settling in to your home. Make sure that they have enough space and resources (e.g. shelters, food, tunnels) within their accommodation to prevent competition and ensure they can avoid each other if they wish to.

If you add guinea pigs at a later date, make sure that they are neutered (if appropriate) and compatible with your current pair or group. It is not advisable to add additional males to male pairs, or to have more than one neutered male in a harem (one neutered male with one or more females). The process of introducing any new guinea pigs must be done gradually and under close supervision - always seek expert advice on how to introduce pets properly.

If you have more than one pair or group of guinea pigs, make sure that they are not housed directly next to each other and ensure they can get out of sight of unfamiliar guinea pigs (and ideally ensure they can't smell them either) or this can cause stress to your pets. This also applies to housing guinea pigs near other species of rodent- they can be active at different times of day and so disturb each other. There is also the risk that your guinea pigs may transmit diseases to other rodent species, and vice versa.

Vet for your pet

Making sure you have someone professional to turn to if your guinea pigs are ill or involved in an accident is very important. Register your guinea pigs at a local veterinary practice before bringing them home from the centre/branch and research your choice thoroughly. You'll also need to give the vet your guinea pigs' medical record as soon as possible; this will be given to you in your adoption pack when you collect your guinea pigs.

Although there are very few pet insurance companies that offer insurance for pet guinea pigs, it is worth thinking about taking out a policy. For just a few pounds a month, you'll be covered for unexpected vet bills in the future and safeguard your pets' health.

Health check

Make sure you treat your guinea pigs for parasites as advised by your vet. If you have adopted male guinea pigs that have not been neutered, don't forget to get this done at the recommended age too if necessary.

Regular grooming is important to keep your guinea pigs' coats in good condition. You may need to have patience as your guinea pigs may not be used to being groomed. Reward your guinea pigs and don't punish or shout at them if grooming is difficult at first- this will only make the experience more stressful for your pets.

Taking your guinea pigs for a health check with your vet at least once a year is really important, and you should also do some simple checks yourself at home. Make sure you check that your guinea pigs' bottoms and the fur around their tails are clean every day, particularly in warm weather; this is important in preventing flystrike. Feeding the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help to prevent a lot of common diseases such as teeth and tummy problems and a lack of vitamin C. Check your guinea pigs' front teeth once a week. Rodents have teeth that never stop growing and if they get too long or grow at the wrong angle, this will be very painful. If you are concerned about your guinea pigs' teeth, speak to your vet. Check the length of their nails every week too; if you're not sure how to trim them ask an expert (e.g. vet, veterinary nurse) for advice.

Getting help

If things aren't going smoothly and you have concerns about your guinea pigs, talk to your vet or contact the RSPCA centre or branch from whom you adopted your guinea pigs. There is lots of useful information and helpful tips on the RSPCA website: www.rspca.org.uk/quineapigs and your local RSPCA centre/branch has leaflets and guides on a range of pet ownership topics.

It takes time, effort and understanding to help your pets get used to their new life, and to help them overcome problems, but all the time and effort will be worth it when the end result is happy additions to your family!