



# Some Useful Information For Guinea Pig Owners



## THE IMPORTANCE OF DIET IN GUINEA PIGS

**Guinea pigs (also known as cavies)** are a popular pet, originating from the mountains and grasslands of South America. Guinea pigs are highly social animals, and should be kept in single-sex groups, pairs or harems. Guinea pigs are nervous animals and can be frightened easily. They are not hardy and therefore should not be exposed to extremes of temperature or humidity. Guinea pigs should not be housed with rabbits, as rabbits tend to bully them and they have very different nutritional requirements.

Guinea pigs are herbivores and their diet should be high in fibre. The ideal guinea pig diet comprises a mixture of commercial pelleted food plus free access to good quality hay and fresh leafy green foods such as grass, dandelion, groundsel, cow parsley and broccoli. Food is primarily eaten in the late afternoon and evening. Guinea pigs, like other rodents are coprophagic – eating caecotrophs (**special faecal pellets**) directly from the anus.

**HAY:** Unlimited high quality hay (**timothy and orchard grass are popular**) should always be available. Eating the long hay strands keeps their digestive system moving and helps prevent their teeth from over growing. Guinea pigs are able to digest hay more efficiently than rabbits, so they eat hay slowly. However, a hay-only diet is inadequate for a guinea pig.

**PELLETS:** As guinea pigs can be selective feeders (**ie picking out their favourite flavours from the mix**), complete pelleted diets are preferable as they ensure your pet has a balanced diet. Commercial diets have vitamin C added, however this does reduce in the food over time due to oxidisation. Purchase pellets in small quantities and store in a dry cool dark place to preserve the potency of the vitamin C (**check expiration date for freshness**).

**And remember, pellets are not a substitute for hay!** Be sure to provide high quality hay all the time for your guinea pigs.

**VITAMIN C** (Ascorbic acid): Guinea pigs cannot manufacture their own vitamin C, like humans and are only able to store vitamin C for a short period of time. The average vitamin C daily requirement is 10mg/kg, increasing when they are growing, ill or pregnant. If the diet is low in vitamin C then scurvy will develop. While many guinea pigs receive adequate vitamin C from fresh vegetables and pellets, you may wish to ensure your guinea pig gets adequate vitamin C by giving a quarter of a 100 mg chewable or plain vitamin C tablet, or provide a small amount of liquid vitamin C drops. Vitamin C degrades rapidly once added to water – so change daily. Excess vitamin C is harmlessly excreted in the urine.



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**Do not give multivitamins!** Plain vitamin C is fine, but multivitamins are not. Excessive amounts of vitamins like A and D can cause serious problems for your pet.

**WATER:** Fresh water should always be available and changed daily. Any changes in watering system or water should be gradual, to allow your pet time to get adjusted to the new source initially.

If water bottles with metal drinking tubes are used, these can oxidise the vitamin C rapidly (50% is lost in 24 hrs) so will require daily changing of the supplemented water.

**VEGETABLES:** Vegetables high in vitamin C are recommended and for their high fibre content. Some vegetables that are high in vitamin C are green or red pepper, asparagus, tomato, broccoli and spinach, as well as all leafy green vegetables – such as parsley, kale and chicory are also good. Wash vegetables thoroughly. Do not feed wilted or spoiled food. Vegetables must be introduced slowly, to avoid digestive upsets. Once introduced, you can supply a variety of them to your pet. Variety is the key to maintaining your pet's health. Be creative.

### NOT RECOMMENDED IN DIET:

- Commercial diets with multi coloured mixes – as this is when they can selectively feed.
- Nuts can be a potential source of mould and then cause illness.
- Dairy and meat products (guinea pigs are herbivores).
- Rabbit pellets (they do not contain Vitamin C).
- Seeds in husks can be a choking hazard.
- Commercial treats marketed for guinea pigs (like yoghurt drops) as they are high in fat, sugars and calcium, which can lead to reduced intake of the correct diet and can predispose to dental disease.