

The Guinea Pig





Chapter 1

Guinea Pigs as Pets



People who live with guinea pigs know that dogs and cats have not cornered the market when it comes to love and affection. Guinea pigs can be very warm-hearted creatures. They adore being petted and love to fall asleep in the lap of a person they trust. Guinea pigs have a large capacity for affection and thrive when they receive love in return.

Guinea pigs are not always thought of as intelligent creatures, but in reality, they are a lot smarter than most people think. They are bright animals with complex social structures who develop relationships with individual people and even animals of other species.

In the wild, guinea pigs are food for predators, and this makes them suspicious by nature. How else would they survive? Because of this, they are often fearful and nervous. But once they learn that they are safe in their environment, the depth of their personality comes shining through.

In the world of pet ownership, there are few things more rewarding than knowing that a guinea pig loves you and trusts you. This trust is something you must earn. You can only establish this kind of rapport with your pet once you have spent time with him, showing him that you are worthy of his confidence.

Life with a guinea pig means staying on your toes. They are active and inquisitive and are always exploring their environment. Aside from being endearing, this kind of behavior can also get them into trouble. That's why guinea pig owners need to be especially vigilant about their pets' whereabouts at all times.

Many people find it surprising to know that guinea pigs can learn to recognize the sound of their favorite humans' voices. They can also learn that the opening of the refrigerator means a treat and the crackling of a plastic bag means

The Advantages of Guinea Pigs

More and more people are discovering what makes guinea pigs such wonderful pets. Some of the things people like most about guinea pigs are:

- They don't need long walks or bathroom breaks.
- They don't need a lot of room.
- They can be trained to use a litter box.
- They are entertaining and curious animals.
- They are social and can bond with their owners and other animals.

food is on its way. Many guinea pigs can also be trained to do a variety of simple tricks. Some talented guinea pigs can learn to use a litter box.

Like all animals, guinea pigs have body language that they use to communicate with members of their own species. Humans who learn to comprehend that language will better understand what their guinea pigs are telling them. Once there is this kind of understanding between human and guinea pig, the bond deepens.

The Right Pet for You?

Compared to a dog, a guinea pig is a fairly easy pet to own. Guinea pigs don't need to go on long walks every day or be taken to obedience school. The owner of a guinea pig can leave their pet alone for several hours a day and not have to worry about the animal needing bathroom breaks.

On the other hand, guinea pigs are not maintenance-free pets. They are social creatures who need a lot of love and attention, along with quality care.

To determine whether a guinea pig would be a good pet for you, think about your lifestyle. Will your job, school, or other commitments allow you to set aside time every day to spend with your guinea pig? Guinea pigs need daily interaction to meet their emotional needs. If you must leave a guinea pig alone for many hours each day, you should probably have two guinea pigs so they can keep each other company. Are you willing to make the commitment to spend

several hours a day with your guinea pig and possibly to take on the responsibility of owning two of them?

Guinea pigs also need daily exercise. Your guinea pig will be confined to a cage or hutch most of the time. Will you be able to let him out each day for supervised activity?

You'll need to scrub your guinea pig's cage every week or so and clean out the soiled areas every day. You'll also have to feed your pet on a regular schedule and make sure he has fresh, clean water all the time. Can you work these tasks into your schedule?

Think about where you live. Do you have room to house a guinea pig? Keep in mind that a guinea pig needs a spacious cage that will keep him safe from other pets and predators and plenty of room to romp during supervised play times.

You must be willing to make changes in your environment. Guinea pigs are chewers, and homes that have guinea pigs must be chew proofed. This requires considerable time and effort. And then there's always the chance that your guinea pig may outwit you and damage something valuable with those destructive teeth. Are you willing to face this possibility?



Guinea pigs are very social creatures and will be terribly lonely and bored if you do not spend time with them every day.



Guinea pigs are curious and entertaining—and adorable.

If you or someone in your family has allergies, will you be able to live with a guinea pig? Guinea pigs can cause severe allergic reactions in some people. Take everyone in your family to a pet store or guinea pig breeder to see if anyone has allergies to guinea pig dander. Find this out *before* you bring a guinea pig home.

If you love other animals as well, then you probably have another issue to think about—other pets. Do you have a dog or a cat? If you add a guinea pig to your home, you will need to think about how your other pets will act toward the newcomer and how the inclusion of the guinea pig is going to affect their lives.

Guinea pigs are instinctively afraid of dogs, and rightfully so, since a dog can easily kill a guinea pig. Most dogs are aggressive toward rodents and will attack them. Cats, while not very dangerous to a rodent as large as an adult guinea pig, can also be less than friendly to guinea pigs. You will need to do a lot of work to either keep your guinea pig separated from your other animals or somehow ensure that they all get along (remembering that this is not always possible).

An important point that many people fail to consider is the legality of guinea pig ownership. Many ordinances do not allow pet rodents in residential areas. Are you zoned for guinea pigs? This, of course, is best discovered before you bring home a new pet.

Another consideration is cost. The price of the guinea pig and his cage is just the beginning. After you bring your pet home, you will have to pay for food, possible spaying or neutering, and vet bills should your guinea pig become ill.

But most important of all, are you willing to make an emotional commitment to your guinea pig? Are you prepared to accept responsibility for a living creature who is solely dependent on you for his well-being? Are you willing to make your pet's health and happiness a priority in your life? If your answer to all these questions is yes, then you might be ready to join the ranks of happy guinea pig owners everywhere.

Guinea Pigs and Children

Children and guinea pigs can be great friends. But you need to ask yourself if your kids are old enough to learn how to handle the guinea pig properly and treat him with respect. These are small animals, and they can easily be hurt. Very young children cannot be expected to understand that a guinea pig needs to be held a certain way and that a guinea pig should not be picked up without adult supervision.

Responsible older children will even be able to take a large role in caring for a guinea pig. But you will still have to take responsibility for the pet, no matter what your children promised when you got him. Even though they have the best of intentions, most children do not have the attention span required for the care of a guinea pig, who may live as long as seven years.

Although a parent should never expect a child to take full responsibility for any pet, allotting guinea pig chores is one way to let everyone in the family participate in the pet's life. Set reasonable goals for your child, depending on their maturity.

A younger child may help out by offering the guinea pig a treat (such as fruit or green vegetables) every day, while an older child can be expected to feed the guinea pig and check his water supply daily.



While cavies have traditionally been thought of as a child's pet, a child should never have the sole responsibility for taking care of a guinea pig.



Just watching your guinea pig can be a lot of fun.

Whatever your child's responsibility, praise him or her for a job well done. You don't want to make the guinea pig a subject your child would rather avoid. And remember that you must always be there to monitor the pet's well-being. No child should be given unsupervised responsibility for any animal. Children cannot be expected to recognize signs of illness in a guinea pig or to be able to judge the guinea pig's well-being. An adult should always be the pet's primary caregiver, ready to take over the child's responsibilities if they forget them. Otherwise, it is the helpless guinea pig who suffers in your struggle to teach your child responsibility.

TIP

Your Children's Friends

Although your child may be mature enough to handle the guinea pig carefully and gently, you cannot be sure their friends will be. If your child wants to show off the pet to friends, make sure you are there to supervise the show and tell.

In addition to helping care for the guinea pig, children can have fun with these pets. Your child can make toys for the guinea pig out of toilet paper tubes, paper bags, empty tissue boxes, and other safe objects. Let your child use their imagination.

Another fun guinea pig activity is simple observation. This is a good way to have your child learn about animal behavior in general and rodent

behavior in particular. Another good way to get your child involved with their pet is to join a 4-H program. See chapter 10 for more information on this hobby.

Younger children can also have a great deal of fun with a guinea pig, although they will need to be supervised. A guinea pig is a great way to teach them to respect other living things. Show them how to be gentle with their pet guinea pig. Let them pet the guinea pig on the floor, but don't allow them to pick him up. Young children can get startled or impatient, or might just not be able to hold the guinea pig properly. As a result, the guinea pig might get dropped and injured. Instead, hold the guinea pig yourself and allow your child to pet him.