



## FACT SHEET – GUINEA PIGS

### TERMS:

**Boar** Adult male – reach sexual maturity at 3-5 weeks

**Sow** Adult female – can reach sexual maturity as early as 4 weeks and can carry litters before they are adults.

**Pup** A young guinea pig - is born fully developed with a full coat of hair and eyes open. They will start wandering around an hour after birth and can take solid food within a day or two.

**Herd** A group of guinea pigs

**Cavy** A name commonly referred to guinea pigs

### INTERESTING FACTS:

- Guinea pigs belong to the rodent family and not the pig family.
- They did not originate from Guinea but from the Andes in South America.
- They do not burrow or build nests but seek shelter in the burrows of other animals.
- Guinea pigs are unable to make their own vitamin C so it needs to be supplemented into their diet.
- Their teeth are constantly growing so it's important for them to chew to wear them down.
- Guinea pigs weigh between 700 and 1200 grams, and measure between 20 and 25 cm in length.
- Guinea pig's life span is generally between 4-5 years, but may live as long as 7-9 years.
- Guinea pigs have 4 toes on the forefoot and 3 on the hind foot.
- Each guinea pig has five different types of hair that makes up their coat.

### HISTORY:

Little is known as to the origin of guinea pigs. They are rodents native to South America and still exist in the wild today. It is believed that guinea pigs (known also as cavies) were domesticated as early as 5000BC as a food source for indigenous Andean cultures. Cavies are still regarded as a food source in South America. Millions are eaten each year!

It is thought that during the late 15th and early 16th century when Spanish traders began regular expeditions to South America, they returned to the European continent with the first cavies. Breeders state that these curious looking, brick-like animals soon became very popular as household pets.

The origins of the name 'Guinea Pig' are unclear. Common theories suggest Guinea may be a corruption of Guiana, a region in South America. Or it may refer to Guinea in West Africa, where the cavy may have passed through on its way to Europe. Another theory claims that the name refers to the gold coin known as a guinea, which one may have paid for each of these small animals.

Why cavies were referred to as "pigs" is not clear. However, a cavy does have a similar body shape to a pig, with a large head for its body, a stout neck, and a rounded rump with a small tail.



## TYPES OF GUINEA PIGS:

Guinea pigs come in a multitude of colours & patterns but are divided into four main coat types:

**Shorthair:** Covering a range of colours, markings and crests

**Coarse-coats:** The coat stands away from the body

**Longhairs:** A long coat which can grow about one inch per month

**Satin:** The coat has a shiny appearance due to hollow hair follicles

Additional groups also help describe the variations in the coat. These are:-

**Crested:** A small crest is evident on the head

**Ticked:** The hair has a base colour with silver tips at the ends of the hair

**Marked:** A patterned coat with more than one colour

**Self:** Any plain solid colour with matching coloured pigment

**Satin and coarse-coats** are also included to help make up distinct groups

Guinea pigs come in 10 main colours: White, black, red, gold, buff (a pale gold), cream, lilac, slate, chocolate and saffron. These colours may be combined with any of the groupings.

## BREEDING:

- Guinea pigs are able to breed all year-round, but spring is the most popular season.
- They can produce as many as five litters per year.
- Gestation (or the pregnancy period) lasts from 59–72 days, with an average of 63–68 days.
- The long gestation period and the large size of the pups result in pregnant females looking large.
- Unlike the offspring of most other rodents who are unable to move and feed themselves, newborn pups are well-developed with hair, teeth, claws, and partial eyesight. They are immediately mobile, and begin eating solid food immediately, though they continue to suckle.



- **Litters consist of 1–6 pups**

*For photos of guinea pigs:* [www.ozanimals.com](http://www.ozanimals.com) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinea\\_pig](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinea_pig)

## **KEEPING GUINEA PIGS:**

- Guinea pigs tend to be messy within their hatch - they scatter food, spread bedding and faeces around, and mark their territory by urinating on the floor and wall surfaces.
- Male guinea pigs may also mark their territory when they are taken out of their cages.
- A guinea pig's hutch should be cleaned regularly of waste and food scraps. Guinea Pigs do not like living in dirty conditions.
- If kept clean, guinea pigs will produce little to no odour. They are subject to Mites this can be helped by adding Vitamin C once a week.
- Domesticated guinea pigs are happier living in groups of 2 or more.
- Generally guinea pigs have a docile nature and enjoy being handled.



## **DIET:**

Guinea Pigs are herbivores and require fresh, clean vegetables and grasses daily. Grass is the guinea pig's natural diet.

### **Do give**

- fresh, raw fruits and vegetables (such as broccoli, apple, cabbage, carrot, celery, spinach carrot tops and peelings, corn husks, broccoli stalks and celery tops)
- clean fresh water should also be provided daily
- fresh grasses or Lucerne chaff - best source of Vitamin C for guinea pigs)
- specialized guinea pig pellets (available from pet stores)

### **Do not give**

- beetroot and rhubarb leaves, oxalis, potato and its peelings as these vegetables are toxic to guinea pigs
- animal products, cakes, white bread or sweets
- excess lettuce may cause diarrhoea

## **DIGESTIVE PROCESS OF GUINEA PIGS:**

Guinea pigs have much longer colons than most rodents. They, like rabbits, supplement their diet by coprophagy (the eating of their own faeces). They do not consume all their faeces indiscriminately, but produce special soft pellets, called cecotropes which recycle B vitamins, fibre, and bacteria that is required for proper digestion. The cecotropes (or caecal pellets) are eaten directly from the anus, unless the guinea pig is pregnant or obese.

# GUINEA PIG BY-PRODUCTS:

## 1. Scientific experimentation

The use of guinea pigs in scientific experimentation dates back at least to the 17th century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century guinea pigs played a major role in the establishment of germ theory. They were often in studies for vaccines, antiviral agents, antibodies and allergic reactions. Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have been replaced in laboratories primarily by mice and rats. Also, guinea pigs have been launched into space several times for scientific experimentation.

(In modern times, the term *guinea pig* is used as a metaphor for a test subject during an experiment.)

## 2. Food

Guinea pigs were originally domesticated for their meat in South America. Traditionally, the animal was reserved for ceremonial meals by indigenous people in the Andean highlands, but since the 1960s it has become more socially acceptable for consumption by all people. However, in western societies, guinea pig meat is generally considered taboo as a food.

## BEHAVIOUR:

Guinea pigs can learn and remember a path for months. They are not particularly agile, are poor climbers but can jump small obstacles. Like other rodents they groom each other. A milky substance is secreted from their eyes and rubbed into the hair during grooming process.

They have very well developed senses of hearing, smell and touch, though their sight is not so well developed. Vocalization is the primary means of communication between themselves.



Some of the sounds are:-

- Wheek – a loud noise known as onomatopoeic also known as a
- Whistle – general excitement ..can be heard at feeding time or if they are lost
- Bubbling or Purring – can be heard when they are enjoying themselves, such as being petted, grooming or finding food.
- Rumbling – is normally related to dominance within the group, sometimes when they are angry
- Chutting & Whining – usually when being chased
- Chattering – this sound is made by rapidly gnashing the teeth and is a sign of warning.
- Squealing or Shrieking – a high pitched sound of discontent or if they are in pain
- Chirping – this is a less common sound, likened to a bird song. It seems to be related to stress or when a baby guinea pig wants to be fed. Though rare it can last for several minutes.

Visit [Google – Guinea Pig – Wikipedia](#), the free encyclopedia, where some of these sounds can be heard!