

# Guinea Pig Nutrition

Created by: Viki Calhoun, RVT

Guinea pigs are strict herbivores with a unique digestive system that requires a specialized diet made up of low energy, high fiber foods. An improper diet can lead to a variety of health concerns such as obesity, dental disease, kidney disease, bladder stones, diabetes, and heart disease.

## Hay

- A high-quality **grass** (avoid legume-based) hay should ALWAYS be available and make up the majority of the diet (70%)
- Grass hays are made from timothy, orchard, meadow, oat, rye, barley, or bermuda grasses.
  - Each type of hay has a different texture and flavor, and some guinea pigs will have a distinct preference.
  - Do not feed alfalfa hay to guinea pigs older than 6 months of age, as it is high in calcium and protein and may lead to kidney and bladder stones as well as obesity.
- Offering a variety of hay types is encouraged as it reduces boredom.
- Grass hay is the most important part of the diet as it provides the necessary high fiber for gut health, and chewing hay helps keep the teeth properly worn down.

## Pellets

- High-quality hay-based pellets provide additional vitamins and minerals not found in hay.
- Pellets should make up approximately 20% of a guinea pigs total diet (about 1/8c daily).
  - Pregnant or nursing mothers and juveniles (<6m old) can have unlimited pellets.
- Avoid alfalfa-based pellets which are too high in calcium and protein.
  - Only appropriate for juveniles (<6m old) and pregnant/nursing mothers
- Most high-quality pellets are fortified with vitamin C, which is a required supplement for guinea pigs.
- Stick to uniform timothy hay-based pellets without added seeds/fruits/nuts/cereals.
  - These are high in fat and lead to selective feeding.

## Produce

- Fresh produce is an important component as it adds a wide variety of micronutrients and water to the diet.
- The majority of produce provided should be dark, leafy greens, with a smaller focus on vegetables.
  - Avoid vegetables that have been associated with gas production (brussels sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, green beans) as gas build up can be very painful and can lead to serious health concerns (i.e. bloat).
  - Be careful with high oxalate greens such as spinach, kale, and chard as overfeeding these can lead to bladder and kidney stones.
  - **DO NOT** feed iceberg lettuce.

- Fruits should make up the smallest percent of produce offered as they are high in sugar which can lead to diarrhea and diabetes. These should be primarily used as a treat.
- Most guinea pigs will tolerate ½-1 cup of fresh produce per day (a full handful), though each guinea pig is different.
  - A guinea pig's tolerance may decrease with age as the GI tract becomes more sensitive.
- When introducing new produce items to your guinea pig, offer one new kind at a time and slowly introduce others, eventually offering several different produce items daily.

#### Recommended Veggies (high oxalate in bold):

- |                            |                      |                      |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| ▪ Romaine lettuce          | ▪ Bell peppers       | ▪ <b>Beet greens</b> |
| ▪ Green / Red leaf lettuce | ▪ Mint               | ▪ Carrots*           |
| ▪ <b>Kale</b>              | ▪ Basil              | ▪ Pumpkin            |
| ▪ <b>Spinach</b>           | ▪ Collard greens     | ▪ Turnip greens      |
| ▪ Parsley                  | ▪ Dandelion greens   | ▪ Celery             |
| ▪ Cilantro                 | ▪ <b>Endive</b>      | ▪ Arugula            |
| ▪ Broccoli leaves          | ▪ Escarole           |                      |
|                            | ▪ <b>Swiss chard</b> |                      |

\*high sugar, use sparingly

#### Treats

- Use caution when buying guinea pig treats. Many treats that are marketed for guinea pigs are too high in fat and have poor nutritional quality. Avoid anything with nuts or seeds, and anything dairy based. The best treats are high-fiber hay-based, such as Oxbow cookies, which come in a variety of flavors.
- Small amounts of fruits can also be used as treats such as blueberries, strawberries, apples, or bananas.

#### Vitamin C

- Guinea pigs cannot produce their own vitamin C, so it must be supplemented in their diet. It is included in most high-quality pellets, but many guinea pigs still need additional supplementation. Options include:
  - ¼ of a human 500mg vitamin C tablet once a day.
  - Oxbow vitamin C biscuit
- **DO NOT** use vitamin C drops that go into the water bottle. It degrades very quickly and there is no way to monitor how much a guinea pig gets.

#### DO NOT GIVE:

- |             |                                       |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| ▪ Chocolate | ▪ Garlic                              |
| ▪ Avocado   | ▪ Grains (breads, crackers, potatoes) |
| ▪ Onion     |                                       |

## **Additional Resources**

- [Chicago Exotics Animal Hospital](#)
- [Oxbow Animal Health](#)
- [Lafaber Vet](#)