

General Care – Rabbits/Guinea Pigs

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When bringing home a new pet, it is important to be well prepared. This is especially true when bringing home any kind of “exotic” pet, such as rabbits and guinea pigs. Even though some pet stores may advertise them as easy “starter” pets, these animals require very specialized care. Diet, habitat, enrichment, and grooming all play a vital role in their overall health and wellbeing. If their needs are not being properly met, they can develop serious health problems.

An important thing to remember when bringing home a rabbit or guinea pig, is that these are naturally prey animals. In the wild, they are hunted, and their natural instincts reflect this. While they can be incredibly friendly, playful, and curious, it can take time for these traits to show themselves. These animals can be easily scared and stressed out, so be patient and gentle with them.

It should also be noted that rabbits and guinea pigs are social animals and tend to do better when living in pairs. It is easiest to adopt an already bonded pair, but not always possible. If introducing new animals to each other, be sure to take it slow and never try to force them together before they're ready, which can lead to fighting and injuries. [House Rabbit Society](#) provides detailed information on the bonding process and best practices to ensure a safe and successful introduction.

DIET

Rabbits and guinea pigs are obligate herbivores and require a high fiber diet. These animals need to be eating constantly through the day in order to keep their GI tract moving appropriately. **If you ever notice your pet has stopped eating or seems to be eating less than normal, please call your veterinarian.**

- High quality grass hay should be available **at all times** and should make up about 70% of their total diet. Options include (but are not limited to):
 - Timothy (most common)
 - Orchard Grass
 - Meadow Hay
 - Oat Hay
 - **Alfalfa is only appropriate for animals under 6 months old, or pregnant / nursing mothers.**

*Different hays have different textures and flavors, and some pets will have a distinct preference.
- Pellets should make up a small part of the diet, approximately 20% (about 1/8c – 1/4c daily).
 - They should be formulated specifically for the species and life-stage.
 - Stick to a uniform pellet – avoid “fancy” mixes which are often higher in fat and can lead to selective eating (and they don't usually pick the nutritious bits...)
- A variety of leafy greens and veggies should be offered in small amounts, less than 10% of the total diet. A few common options (again, this is not a complete list) include:
 - Romaine Lettuce
 - Green/Red Leaf Lettuce
 - Spinach
 - Arugula
 - Kale
 - Cilantro

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- Parsley
- Basil
- Mint
- Dandelion
- Greens
- Turnip Greens
- Brussel Sprouts*
- Bell Peppers*
- Broccoli leaves*
- Celery*
- Carrots*

*These should be fed sparingly

- Fruits should be offered very sparingly, as a treat; these are high in sugar and can lead to health problems if fed too much.
- The best commercially made treats to offer are hay based, high fiber treats. Avoid anything dairy based or nuts/seeds/cereals.
 - Always read the treat labels and stick to those that are low protein/fat/calcium/sugar. Keep in mind that not everything the pet stores sell is actually good for your pet.
- A special consideration for guinea pigs: they do not produce their own vitamin C, so it needs to be supplemented in their diet. High quality pelleted diets often include vitamin C, it can be found in many of their favorite veggies, or there is a vitamin C “treat” made by Oxbow that can be offered daily. You can also quarter a human's 500mg tablet of vitamin C and give a quarter tablet daily, and many pigs take it as if it is a treat.

**DON'T: 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.*

**Refer to our specific nutrition handouts for more information.*

Habitat

In general, bigger is better when it comes your pet's housing. Most store-bought cages that are marketed for these animals are too small to allow for proper exercise and true comfort. These animals love to run around and explore, and this should be encouraged!

- For guinea pigs, a C&C (cube & coroplast) cage is a great option. These can be bought premade, or one can be constructed at home using a large sheet of coroplast and a set of wire cube storage panels (step by step tutorials can be found online). They can be open-top or fully enclosed and are very easy to customize based and you and your pets' needs.
- For rabbits, large, open-top dog exercise pens work very well (although a covering is recommended if there are other animals free roaming in the home).
 - Rabbits love to free roam during the day, which is wonderful for keeping them active and stimulated, but it is incredibly important to make sure to rabbit-proof any rooms they can access – they can, and will, chew whatever they can get to. They are also prone to digging, so be aware of potential carpet damage.

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Fleece cage liners, reusable potty pads, or towel/blankets are all good options to line the enclosure – they are easy to clean, it is easy to monitor bathroom habits, and the area around the enclosure can be kept tidier without loose bedding being tossed around. They also provide a nice layer of cushion under your pets' feet, which can help prevent pododermatitis (“bumblefoot”).

- Just be sure that your pet is not chewing up and ingesting the materials in the cage, as this could lead to an obstruction in the GI tract.
- Rabbits can also be easily litterbox trained, just make sure the walls of the box are low enough for them to easily get in and out. For litter, avoid anything clay-based (like traditional cat litter), or scented. Small animal paper bedding or paper pellets (like Yesterday's News) typically work well. Placing a little hay in the litterbox can help encourage your rabbit to sit in the box.

Be sure to provide plenty of places to hide in the enclosure so that your pet can feel safe and secure. Hides can be plastic, wood, fabric, even cardboard boxes, just remember that anything in the enclosure is likely going to be chewed on. If you have multiple animals living together, you should ideally have 1 hide per pet to keep them from fighting over space.

Enrichment

Rabbits and guinea pigs are curious little animals with natural instincts to explore, hide, and play, and they are quite smart. It's important to keep their minds and bodies active to keep them happy and reduce destructive behaviors. Proper enrichment includes physical, mental, and social/emotional aspects.

A variety of toys should be available in the enclosure, and these should be rotated out regularly to prevent your pet from getting bored with them. Ideally, toys should be made entirely of materials that are safe to chew (wood, cardboard, bamboo, rattan etc.) to minimize risk of injury or accidental ingestion of dangerous materials. Some toys are designed specifically for chewing, while others are designed to hide treats and food, which promotes mental stimulation as well. Just like with the hay, some animals may have a distinct preference when it comes to the materials of their toys, so offer a variety of textures and take note of which ones they seem most interested in. Keep in mind, this does not need to be an expensive endeavor, DIY toys work just as well (ex: cardboard boxes, brown packing paper, paper towel tubes, etc.).

You can also provide enrichment through the set-up of the habitat itself. Tunnels, hides, and fleece “forests” or curtains promote exploration; you can even set up a maze in the enclosure. You can also use their food to engage them further. Hay and pellets can be offered in different types of feeders and toys (avoid metal hay balls as animals can become stuck).

**Refer to our “small mammal enrichment” handout for more information.*

Grooming

For the most part, rabbits and guinea pigs are self-groomers, like cats. They do not require regular bathing, and in fact, bathing these animals can be incredibly stressful and should be avoided (especially for rabbits). However, there are a few grooming necessities that do fall on the owners.

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- Nail trims – Since these animals typically live indoors with soft floors, they do not wear down their nails well on their own. If not trimmed regularly, nails can become overgrown and can even curl under and puncture or become embedded into the paw. Overgrown nails can also become snagged on things and cause injury. Depending on the temperament of your animal, you can learn how to do this at home, or you can have it done at your veterinarian's office. Groomers may also be able to do it, but make sure it is one that is comfortable and knows how to properly handle exotic pets.
- Dental care – The teeth of rabbits and guinea pigs grow continuously throughout their lives. With a proper diet and access to chewing materials, they can usually keep the teeth worn down to a safe level, however, teeth can become overgrown become a cause for concern. If you notice your pet drooling, dropping food, losing interest in food or being selective with foods, or facial swelling, have them evaluated by a veterinarian. If a dental problem is found, your pet may need to be anesthetized for an occlusal adjustment, where the teeth will be filed down to an appropriate level.
- Brushing – Like cats, rabbits can get hairballs from grooming themselves; however, unlike cats, rabbits cannot vomit and expel their hairballs. These hairballs can potentially be passed through the GI tract, but may cause pain as they do so. Larger hairballs may not be able to pass at all and can cause an obstruction. Brushing your rabbit regularly (and gently), particularly during times of heavy shedding, can help reduce that risk. Guinea pigs do not typically require brushing, except those with long hair.
 - If you ever notice matting of the fur that cannot be brushed out, do not try to cut it! Rabbits have highly sensitive skin and scissors or clippers used improperly can cause serious injury. Please contact your veterinarian for assistance.

Veterinary Care

Routine vet care is essential for keeping your pet happy and healthy. Yearly exams with an experienced exotic veterinarian along with routine bloodwork can help detect potential health issues before they become serious or life-threatening. You can also talk to your vet about spaying / neutering your pet. Doing so can help reduce the risk of reproductive diseases and may help with certain behavioral concerns, however, surgery is not without risks. Please be sure to discuss the risks and benefits in depth with your veterinarian and let them know of any health issues, past or present, before proceeding.

If your pet is exhibiting any signs of illness or discomfort, it is always best to have them evaluated by a vet sooner rather than later. Being prey animals, rabbits and guinea pigs tend to hide signs of illness as best they can, and their visible symptoms may appear less severe than they actually are. When sick, these animals can decline very quickly.

- **When to call the vet:**
 - Coughing / sneezing
 - Nasal / ocular discharge
 - Decreased appetite / defecation
 - Bloody urine
 - Wounds
 - Lumps
 - Limping, mobility changes
 - Weight loss
 - Head tilt

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- Excessive scratching
- Lack of grooming
- Diarrhea
- **EMERGENCIES:**
 - Not eating or defecating >4hrs
 - Difficulty breathing / open mouth breathing
 - Bloating of the abdomen
 - Straining to urinate
 - Trauma
 - Seizures
 - Severe lethargy / unresponsive

***If you ever notice changes with your pet and are unsure if a vet visit is needed or whether it is an emergency, please call your vet – it's always better to be safe.**

Additional Resources

- [Red Door Animal Shelter](#)
- [House Rabbit Society](#)
- “Getting Started: Clicking with Your Rabbit” by Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin, Karen Pryor Clickertraining, 2006
- [Chicago Exotics Animal Hospital](#)
- [Oxbow Animal Health](#)
- [Lafaber Vet](#)