



# GUINEA PIG CARE

The following is everything you need to know about guinea pig care. Make sure you check out the information on food and cages before purchasing either of those items. Guinea pigs are the most misunderstood of the animals we adopt out. Cage size and diet are very important--the information you find in the pet stores is most likely wrong. So read carefully and email ([rasa.rescue@gmail.com](mailto:rasa.rescue@gmail.com)) if you have any questions at all!

\*Note: If you are a teacher looking to adopt a guinea pig for your classroom: we have a specific set of rules to which you must agree before adopting from us. See the last page to read those rules. We ask that if you cannot adhere to these rules that you please be honest with us and either adopt a different type of animal or refrain from adopting from us.

## About Pigs

Guinea pigs are very social and very intelligent creatures. They come in different colors and sizes and both smooth and abbyssinian (hair with lots of swirls in it) varieties. Like dogs and cats, they can become depressed, and the best way to send them into depression is to ignore them. Pigs are also very routine-oriented. They know they get their veggies after dinner every day, so when the sun goes down, they'll start calling you. They learn and live by their routines. They learn and respond to their names. They know your voice, your smell, the sound of your footfalls, and they know when strangers are around.

## Social Requirements

Pigs have much more in common with dogs and cats than hamsters and gerbils. As is mentioned above, they know their people and live by their routines. They need daily social interaction--sitting on your lap, petting time, run time on the floor (in a pig-safe area), etc.

Some pigs are more active and adventurous than others. Active and adventurous pigs need time on the floor to run around and play. Less active, less adventurous pigs need more lap time. That's what's great about adopting from a rescue--we can tell you which type your pig is and match you with the type you want.

But even shy pigs who prefer lap time to floor time will learn to run around. Pigs can become overweight easily, so exercise is important. If the pig won't play, set up the play pen every day and put her in it anyway. Always put her in the same place so she gets used to it. Leave her there by herself for 20 or 30 minutes every day. She will most likely be more comfortable on her own during floor time than with you there--pigs are naturally shy. Eventually, she will become confident with "her" territory and will learn to run and play. Regardless of their confidence during floor time, lap time is important for both adventurous and shy pigs, as they need to be social to be happy.

## Multiple Pigs and Bonding

Females usually do well in pairs, but this is a stereotype rather than a rule. We usually recommend that male pigs, on the other hand, stay single unless they show distinct signs of loneliness. Males tend to fight when they get older, though this is again a stereotype rather than a rule. Signs of loneliness include constant yelling for attention and apathy towards food and play time (apathy can also be a health problem--you may want to consult a vet). Once you get to know your pig, you will begin to understand its actions and what they mean. If you are paying attention, you will most likely know if your pig is lonely.

In other words, most pigs don't need a mate. And just as some are distinctly lonely by themselves, some pigs are distinctly happy alone and don't want a mate. It is better to have a single pig who is happy than two pigs who fight. Usually, it's one pig doing the fighting and the other getting beat up. If you find scratches or cuts on one of your pigs, they should be separated immediately.

If you already have one pig and want another, the best way to pick the second pig is to let them pick each other. Put your pig and each candidate in a playpen together and see how they interact. Clicking of teeth is a bad sign--if the pigs begin clicking their teeth at each other, the bond will not be a good one. Biting is also a bad sign. You should give them a good 20 minutes together before taking the second pig home, and you should keep an eye on them the first week or two that they are together.



If you are adopting your second pig from us, we do require that you bring your pig with you before we will send them home together. This way, we can make sure the two pigs won't be put in a situation that is dangerous to their health.

The good news about adopting pairs from us is that we have watched them closely to be sure that the pair does well together. We routinely separate fighting pigs and match up lonely ones. So while we can't guarantee a perfect match, we've done everything possible to make sure you won't have problems when your pigs come home.

## Food

Unlike with hamsters and gerbils, where you can buy any food at the store, guinea pig food is tricky—and very, very important.

Most pet stores sell alfalfa-based food. Even the food that says “timothy-based” on the front usually has alfalfa in it (check the label on the back to be sure). Only baby pigs should eat food that contains alfalfa. Once they're full grown, alfalfa causes kidney and bladder stones and almost always kills them by three years old. Pigs should live 5-8 years. Timothy-based, alfalfa-free food is therefore a must.



We recommend you get either Oxbow or Zupreem food. Pet stores sometimes sell these brands, but it can be frustrating looking for them. We recommend you buy them online. Oxbow (<http://www.oxbowhay.com/>) is the cheaper of the two brands. Cavy Cuisine is for pigs over 1 year old. Cavy Performance is for baby pigs. Ask us for specifics if you're adopting a baby pig.

Zupreem is a better quality food, as it does not contain soy (some pigs are allergic to soy). It's the more expensive of the two brands. You can often find it at Petco. Make sure, though, that you buy Zupreem and not Supreme. Also make sure you get the

bag labeled “timothy-based,” not alfalfa-based. Always check the ingredients label to be sure. You can also buy it at <http://www.petfooddirect.com/> (search “Zupreem Guinea Pig Food”). Click here to find out how you can support RASA Rescue just by buying your food online. Here’s the daily diet for an adult pig:

- \* 1/8 cup of alfalfa-free high quality guinea pig (cavy) food (per pig)
- \* as much timothy hay as they’ll eat (this does not cause them to be fat, is important to digestion, and keeps them busy during the day when they’re alone)
- \* large handful of fresh veggies every day (NO iceberg lettuce; romaine lettuce, endive, and/or escarole should be the bulk of their veggies and a couple baby carrots and/or green beans are okay as supplements--we’ll give you a more complete list when you pick up your pig(s))

For a baby pig, just switch the first item to 1/4 cup alfalfa-based pellets per pig.

Be sure to feed your pig every single day. Guinea pigs treat their food like dogs do, not hamsters and gerbils. They do not hoard or save food. Even if there’s hay left in their cage, it has probably been walked on. Your pig will not eat hay after she’s walked on it--she only wants clean fresh hay.

It’s also good to feed your pig at the same time every day. They live by their routines. If they are fed at different times every day, they will not know when to expect their food. This is stressful for the pig, and possibly for you too, as the pig may begin begging for food around the clock.

## **Cage Types and Sizes**

Cages are the most expensive--and the most important--start up cost. Thankfully, it’s a one-time expense. Remember when you’re shelling out all that money that in the case of guinea pigs, cage size really is important. Your pig is going to be with you possibly as long as eight years—she should have enough space to walk around and move. See the listings below to learn about which cage size is right for your pig and keep in mind that the labels on the cages at the pet stores are not accurate.

What you want to remember when you buy cages (and food for that matter) is that pet stores--and the labels on the products at the pet stores--do not know what they’re talking about. They say things are good for animals and they’re not. The smallest size cages they have for guinea pigs are more suitable for large rats than any guinea pig. You might have to buy a rabbit cage to get one large enough. Rabbit and pig cages are exactly the same except for the picture on the box.

You do have the option of building your own cage. This is fairly easy, though finding the flooring can be a bit of a challenge. See the next section for more information.

\*Note: If you’re adopting the pig(s) for a classroom, we may be able to help you with cost if you need the help. We often have used cages that we sell for half retail price (\$30 for a one-pig cage, \$40 for a two-pig cage). We ask that you only buy from us if you cannot afford a cage from the store. We also can’t guarantee we’ll have any to sell you—sometimes we do, sometimes we don’t. Definitely ask us if you this is something you need!

### **One Pig**

The minimum size we recommend for one pig is 30” long. A bit longer is even better if you can afford it--the next size up is what we try to use in the rescue when we have the resources. Take that number--30 inches--to the store with you. They’re usually about 17” wide--width is pretty standard regardless of brand. It’s length you want to watch out for. At some stores and with some brands, going up a size is not very expensive (a difference of \$5-\$15, which isn’t much on top of the amount they’re already making you pay). Keep

in mind that the smallest size cages that are labeled “guinea pig” are NOT suitable for pigs. Large rats maybe; pigs, no. Keep in mind also that a higher price does not mean better in the pet store world—it just means higher price. It’s about size—if there’s one that significantly cheaper and the same size, there’s nothing wrong with it—buy it. You may have to look at the cages labeled “rabbit” to find the right sizes—it depends on the store and the brand. Rabbit and guinea cages are exactly the same except that “rabbit” cages are the larger sizes.

## Two Pigs

40”L X 18”W X 20”H [EXAMPLE](#)

This is the minimum size we recommend for two pigs. If you go to the store to buy cages, take the dimensions for this cage with you to compare. Bigger is better because a pair of pigs will need two houses to keep them from fighting over space. It’s also the same price as some smaller cages of different brands.

## Build Your Own Cage!

You can easily make your own cage. There are really two basic parts to a guinea pig cage: the solid (NOT wire) pan that makes up the bottom and the sides. The pan at the bottom can be any number of things. The typical home made pan is coroplast, which is essentially corrugated cardboard, except it’s plastic. Your pan has to be cleanable. You don’t want anything that can absorb urine. You can put down a plastic sheet on the bottom and cover that (carefully--your pig should not be allowed to chew the sheet) with spare kitchen floor laminate or tile. Any hard plastic sheet will do. You don’t want your pig to have access to any type of soft plastic, like garbage bags or “cage liners.” They will eat these, and it will kill them.

Finding coroplast can be a bit of a challenge. Try craft stores, hardware stores, and home improvement stores (Ace, Aco, Home Depot, Lowes, etc.). We suggest searching these stores via a phone book and your telephone rather than driving to each place. They may have alternative hard plastic material to suggest as well.

The sides of the cage are usually wire. Google “cube shelving” to find shelving units made of wire grids. Target always has cube shelving and other similar stores do too sometimes. Calling won’t be as useful for this material, as store clerks may not know what you’re talking about. Look in shelving, book case, and home organization sections to find what cube shelving.

The cube shelving grids make excellent sides for your cage, not to mention play pens and pig-proofing materials. You may want to include a three inch lip around the side of the bottom to make it a true pan--this will help keep the bedding in the cage and not on your carpet outside it.

Using these materials, you can build a cage of any size. You can even build a double-layer cage by making a roof on the bottom layer out of the wire grids and putting another hard plastic floor over it.

To the right is an example of an excellent home made guinea pig cage.



## Cage Placement

Guinea pigs like to be in the thick of things, like dogs and cats. A central location is therefore preferred. A living or family room or kitchen location works well. A well-used bedroom or playroom is also a good location. Contrary to what you might think, the floor is a good place for a guinea pig cage. If you put something with traction on the door (i.e. piece of carpet, furry fabric, straw mat), then when it is lowered, the pig has a ramp that he can use to come and go as he pleases. Many pigs will go back to their cage to urinate. Make sure that if you do use a ramp that the area the pig plays in is pig-proofed. See the section labeled "play time" to learn how to pig-proof a room. You can also attach a play pen to the cage for play time for the same effect.



## Cage Accessories



In addition to a cage, you will need:

- One igloo or house per pig (this means two houses for a pair to avoid fighting)
- One medium-to-large size water bottle and some way to attach it to the cage (bottle holder, zip or cable ties, rope, etc.)
- One food bowl
- Straw mat or something similar to put on the cage door, if you plan to use it as a ramp (see above section)

## Cage Cleaning

Guinea pigs need their bedding cleaned once a week minimum. If your pig uses the corners of the cage to go to the bathroom, try scooping out the corners every couple of days, pushing the old bedding into the corners, and adding new bedding to the middle. This helps limit the smell and allows you to clean the cage less often.

Cleaning the cage is pretty easy--dump it all out, wipe it down, and refill it with just enough to cover the bottom. Once you get used to it, it can easily be done in 15 minutes.

Note: If you use towels or other fabric as bedding, cages must be cleaned more often. Urine does not absorb into fabric the way it does in bedding and poop does not get buried either. If you use fabric, the fabric should be run through the laundry machine at least twice every week and poop should be scooped or swept out of the cage at least every other day.

### Bedding

You can use several different types of bedding:

- aspen (cheap at tractor supply stores and good on the feet)
- shredded or torn newspaper (if you have a shredder or strong hands and time--but you want to add aspen to the top of this, as it smells without it)
- CareFresh (bad side of this is you have to freeze it before you use it because it sometimes has mites in it, and it's expensive)
- wood stove pellets or Equine Fresh (works well on smell, but you should add some other type to it or it will be too rough on their feet)

- Yesterday's News (alone or with one of the others)
- EcoFresh (great stuff, very expensive)
- Towels, pillow cases, fleece, rags, and other fabric (this is much cheaper but must be changed at least twice each week; shake out the towels and pillow cases and wash them in the laundry machine; make sure your pig cannot climb inside pillow cases--you don't want her to get stuck and suffocate or hurt herself)

**Never use pine or cedar. These are very bad for pigs.**



## Play Time

Play time is important for your pig. But you should know how to handle play time. Pigs cannot be put in balls like hamsters and guinea pigs, despite the fact that pet stores sell balls that say they are made for pigs. The play balls that people use for hamsters and gerbils curve in the opposite direction of a pig's back. It is painful for them to run in a ball and can easily result in accidental broken backs if someone kicks it or the pig rams something too hard. Pigs use playpens (see right), not balls. You can get those at the pet store too or you can make them yourself using the pieces from cube shelving (google "cube shelving" to see what this is).

The alternative to a play pen is a pig-proofed room. Pigs should not have access to the areas under low-sitting couches and chairs and cannot have access to wires, as they will chew these. Two by fours can be put in the opening under couches and secured by tying them to the couch legs using rope or wire. The areas on either side of an entertainment center and around lamps or electrical outlets with wires can be secured using the pieces from cube shelving (again, google "cube shelving" to see what this is). Keep in mind that the connectors that come with cube shelving don't work. Use zip or cable ties or plastic tape to secure the cube pieces to each other. Cube shelving pieces work well under bed skirts, too, keeping pigs from getting under beds.

If you have any questions about play pens, cube shelving, or pig-proofing, ask us! We've got a lot of experience with it as we use all of these things in our own homes!

## Guinea Pig Hygiene

### Nail Trimming

Trimming your pig's nails is very important. It should be done about once a month. The key is to cut them often enough that you only have to cut off the very tip. If you don't cut them often enough, the quick--the nerve in the nail that is painful if cut--grows longer. Then you can't cut the nail short enough. Nails that are too long can be easily broken, which is painful for your pig. They also get caught in bedding, carpet, and other places, which can wrench your guinea pig's legs--also painful. In general, it's just best to get used to it and do it every month.

### Bathing

Guinea pigs only need baths if they are sticky or smelly. Many females never need bathes at all. Males do sometimes need bathes but shouldn't be bathed more than two or three times a year. Males have scent glands on their rear ends that can sometimes be sticky or smelly. Sometimes just cleaning that area will suffice. Winter bathes should be avoided, as the cold air can cause colds.

Pigs should be bathed using small animal shampoo or kitten shampoo made for sensitive skin. The sink is the best place to bathe your pig, as it's the right size and will keep your pig from getting away. Put a towel in the bottom of the sink so your pig has traction for its feet.

Hold your pig in one hand and either use a spray hose to get it wet or a glass. Water straight from the faucet can get too hot too quickly and can be too loud (scary for a little piggy!). Rub the shampoo into your pig's fur.

Keep both the water and the shampoo away from its face. If its face needs cleaning, use a cloth after the bath. Water and shampoo should never be allowed to get in your pig's ears. Keep the shampoo out of its eyes as well and try to keep the water out of its eyes too.

After the shampoo has been rubbed in, simply rinse your pig in water. Use a towel to dry the pig off as much as possible. Then put him back in his cage and cover it with a sheet to keep out drafts until he is dry.



## **Rules for Guinea Pig Owners**

These rules summarize everything above.

1. Pigs must be housed in appropriate cages. See the section on cages above to see what is considered appropriate.
2. Like dogs, pigs must be fed every day. Unlike hamsters, they do not hoard or save food.
3. Pigs cannot be put in balls, despite the fact that pet stores sell balls labeled for pigs. The play balls that people use for hamsters and such curve in the opposite direction of their backs. It's painful for them and can easily result in accidental broken backs if someone kicks it or the pig rams something too hard. Pigs use playpens, not balls. You can get those at the pet store too or you can make them yourself (we can tell you how).
4. Pigs must have time out of their cages every day. They are social creatures. They get distressed and

depressed without social contact from their people. With a pair of pigs, this is somewhat less likely, but they will forget their people skills if they're not handled daily, which can result in biting and such. In addition, it can be distressing to leave pigs alone longer than they're used to--they live by their routine, more so than any other animal I've ever encountered.

5. Pigs cannot be allowed to wander in an area that is not pig-proofed unless they are in a play pen. Pigs are very good at chewing and will chew electrical wires if they can get at them. Some will also chew wood--especially rough wood. So either set up the play pen or ask us how to pig-proof a room for them. If the room they are in is pig-proofed, you can put their cage on the floor and leave the door open during play time—they will come and go as they please and most likely only pee in their cage.

6. Their cage must be cleaned at least once per week. For a messy pig, a pair of pigs, or pigs using fabric as bedding, you will need to clean at least twice a week. Frankly, the more often you clean, the better. How many nights would you want to spend in your own old urine and poop?

7. Keep your pig's nails trimmed, and bathe her when necessary.

8. Pigs adopted from RASA Rescue cannot be given to someone else. If you don't want or can't keep your pigs any more, bring them back to RASA Rescue. We will always take them back, even if it's six years later, and we only euthanize animals if they are suffering from a terminal or painful illness.

9. If you ever have any questions about caring for your pig, email or call RASA Rescue! We have years of experience with guinea pigs and are always happy to answer questions!

## Classroom Rules for Guinea Pig Adoptions

Some of these rules are specific for classrooms, some are given to everyone. Rules one and six are the most important ones for classrooms. We ask that if you cannot adhere to these rules that you please be honest with us about it and either adopt a different type of pet or refrain from adopting from us. We are very strict about these policies simply because the good of the animal is our first priority.

1. The pigs must be taken home over the weekend. Pigs sometimes spill their water bottles and if they do that on Friday night, they will be dead on Monday morning. In addition, pigs (unlike hamsters) need to be fed daily, as they will not save food for themselves for the next day. Their hay in particular will be gone by Saturday night. Veggies are also a daily necessity, as is socialization. Guinea pig intelligence is much closer to that of dogs than hamsters, and it is scary for them to not have contact for two straight days. So they absolutely cannot be left at school over the weekend. If you cannot do this, we ask that you please be honest with us and either consider another type of animal or refrain from adopting from us. We'd be happy to help you choose an animal that is more suitable to your situation.

You really have two options here. You can either take the whole cage home (the cages are not heavy--just awkward, so this would not be overly difficult) every weekend or you could get two cages, one for home and one for school, and just bring the pigs home in a small cat carrier (this is significantly more expensive in terms of supplies, but moderately easier).

2. All interaction with students must be supervised, and the students must be taught how to properly hold the pig. This one seems pretty obvious, but it's important because pigs have delicate backs. Their rear ends have to be supported when they're held or they risk painful or broken backs.

3. Pigs cannot be put in balls, despite the fact that pet stores sell balls labeled for pigs. The play balls that people use for hamsters and such curve in the opposite direction of their backs. It's painful for them and can easily result in accidental broken backs if someone kicks it or the pig rams something too hard. Pigs use playpens, not balls. You can get those at the pet store too or you can make them yourself (we can tell you how).

4. Pigs must have time out of their cages every day, both during the school year on the weekends, and in the summer as well. They are social creatures. They get distressed and depressed without social contact from their people. With a pair of pigs, this is somewhat less likely, but they will forget their people skills if they're not handled daily, which can result in biting and such. In addition, it can be distressing to leave pigs alone longer than they're used to--they live by their routine, more so than any other animal I've ever encountered.

5. As with all other adopters, you must provide a cage of the proper minimum size and the appropriate type of food. See the Guinea Pig Care page for information on cage size and food.

6. Final rule. You have to take the pigs home in the summer. They cannot be given to students over the holiday. We require this because pigs have very specific dietary and social needs, and we can only adopt one out if we can guarantee that it will be provided for appropriately year round for the rest of its life. Plus, they do know who their people are. The pigs in my basement, for example, all know my voice and come running when they hear me. If someone else goes down there with me, they all hide. They know me, they know their names, they know their feeding schedules, and it's traumatic for them to lose their people over and over again.