

Feeding your pet guinea pig

Guinea pigs come from Central and South America and live in extended family groups in areas of long grass. They make runs or pathways through the tall vegetation and eat as they go! In an ideal world, we would keep our guinea pigs in an uncut hay meadow, but then we'd never see them... and the average back garden is not a hay meadow!

What should I feed my guinea pig?

It is really important to give guinea pigs a diet that is high in fibre, as it would be in the wild. In practice this means making sure that they have an unlimited supply of hay whenever they can't be outside grazing on grass. Because hay doesn't contain all the nutrients they need, guinea pigs also need to be fed a concentrate food as well.

Guinea pigs are related to chinchillas, but this doesn't mean their diets are the same. Your guinea pig will also eat fresh vegetables, but try to avoid too much of the very watery vegetables like lettuce (especially iceberg lettuce) and cucumber. You should also avoid feeding very sweet treats, as they can affect their teeth in the same way as they can our own!

Is vitamin C important for guinea pigs?

Yes it is. Different books will tell you slightly different amounts required, but a guinea pig needs somewhere between 5 and 30 mg of vitamin C each day in order to stay healthy. However, a young, growing animal, or one that is sick, pregnant or feeding young, will need more than a healthy adult guinea pig.

Signs of a lack of vitamin C (deficiency) start to show within two weeks if the diet is not adequate. Young guinea pigs become unwilling to move and may go off their food, this is because of pain in their joints and around their teeth. Adult animals also get joint and tooth pain, but it is important to remember that a lack of vitamin C ('scurvy') will also make the animal more susceptible to many other diseases such as chest infections and skin disease. Scurvy also slows the rate of healing, so wounds may not heal as they should.

Is my guinea pig getting enough?

It's easy to find out, just follow these 4 steps:

- Make sure that you are feeding a good, supplemented guinea pig food, either a mix or pellets. Look at the label and make sure there is plenty of vitamin C in it. Vitamin C doesn't last long in manufactured food, so make sure the packet is within its sell-by date, and don't buy too much at a time, as once the pack is opened, vitamin C levels will decrease even faster. Keep opened packs in an airtight box.
- Let your guinea pigs out into their run as often as possible. They don't mind a cool day, so long as it's not too wet! Let them mow your lawn for you. You could fence off part of your garden to grow wild for them. Actively growing grass and weeds are an excellent source of vitamin C.
- You can feed green vegetable, but bear in mind that once vegetables have been in store, the vitamin C content decreases. Some people feed their guinea pigs oranges, but most people find that their guinea pigs won't touch them!
- If your guinea pigs are ill, pregnant or feeding young, think about supplementing their vitamin C using tablets from your vet. You can crush the tablets and give a bit of the powder between slices of apple or another favourite treat, however, if your guinea pigs have unlimited access to fresh, actively growing grass, you probably won't need to do this.

Can I put vitamins in the drinking water?

There are vitamin supplements sold for adding to drinking water, but beware! Before you use them for this purpose, check the following:

- That the supplement has enough vitamin C in it. Look at the label and remember how much your guinea pig needs each day.
- Remember that vitamin C quickly goes off when exposed to sunlight, so you might want to use a dark-coloured glass bottle to hold the water.
- Vitamin C is a mild acid that reacts with a lot of metals and is subsequently destroyed. If you use vitamin C in a water bottle, make sure the spout is made of stainless steel.

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Why do guinea pigs chew their own fur?

If your guinea pig chews its own fur it might be that there isn't enough fibre in its diet. Other types of skin disease may be made worse by inadequate vitamin C in the diet.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your pet please contact The Veterinary Hospital, Plymouth on 01752 702646 and we will be happy to advise you.