

Common Name: Guinea Pig

Scientific Name: *Cavia porcellus*



IUCN Red list Status: Least Concern

AZA Conservation Program: None

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Family: Caviidae

Genus: Cavia

History: The wild ancestor of the domestic guinea pig is the wild cavy, which lives in grasslands, woodlands, and many other environments in North America. First domesticated in approximately 2-5,000 BCE, selective breeding in the Andes improved the guinea pig as a food source and these strains formed the basis of modern breeds. They are still bred in South America as a source of food and bred in North America as household pets.

Physical Characteristics: An adult will measure 8-10 inches from the tip of its nose to the end of its rump. Their hair comes in a wide range of colors and the hair may be long, short or short and curly. Males are generally larger than females and may weigh over three pounds when fully grown.

Reproduction: Guinea pig pregnancies last approximately 10 weeks; on giving birth to the babies the female is fertile again. Guinea pigs can give birth to up to 8 babies but the usual litter size is around 3 or 4. The normal birth weight for a guinea pig is around 80g larger litters will result in smaller babies or in a small litter the babies may be larger. Females come into 'season' and are receptive to becoming pregnant every 16 days. Females can become pregnant from as young as four weeks of age.

Longevity: 5-7 years on average, possibly as old as 10

Diet: Cavies in the wild eat a variety of grasses. Their molars are particularly suited for grinding plant matter, and grow continuously throughout the animal's life. Guinea pigs have much longer colons than most rodents; they must also supplement their diet by *coprophagy*, the eating of their own feces. However, they do not consume all their feces indiscriminately, but produce special soft pellets, called *cecotropes*, which recycle B vitamins, fiber, and bacteria required for proper digestion. The cecotropes (or caecal pellets) are eaten directly from the anus, unless the guinea pig is pregnant or obese.



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Miscellaneous: Guinea pigs have a very good sense of smell and sensitive hearing. They love to vocalize (see below). A male guinea pig is a boar and a female is a sow. Baby guinea pigs are pups. Guinea pigs must always have access to forage material. Be sure to put orchard grass or timothy (kept in the stall with the guinea pigs) in crates with the guinea pigs and bring extra for long programs.

Breeds: Most guinea pig breeds are distinguished by hair length and type. In addition to the breeds, some guinea pigs also possess a satin mutation that creates a hollow hair shaft and an exceptionally shiny coat. Unfortunately this mutation is associated with medical problems.

- The American (or “self”) has short, smooth hair and is both the most common breed of guinea pig and the modern breed most like the varieties produced for food.
- Abyssinian guinea pig coats are characterized by deep swirls of hair with a single center called rosettes.
- Crested guinea pigs have a single rosette on their head and short hair (like the American).
- Coronets have a single rosette on their head, but their hair is long.
- Peruvians are the longest of the long hair breeds and their hair naturally parts down the center of their back with their hair falling forward over the forehead.
- Silkie or Sheltie guinea pigs have long hair like the Peruvian, but instead of parting on their back, their hair sweeps straight back and their face is visible.
- Teddy guinea pigs have a wiry, short dense coat and the texture of their hair resembles the stuffed animal for which they are named.
- Texel guinea pigs have long curly hair that looks permed and sometimes falls in ringlets.
- Guinea pigs also come in two hairless breeds – Skinny Pigs and Baldwins.



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Guinea Pig Vocalization Guide:

- **Wheek** a whistle like noise indicating excitement. It may occur in response to presence of the owner or anticipation of feeding. It is sometimes used to find other guinea pigs if they are running. If a guinea pig is lost, it may wheek for assistance.
- **Rumbling** is related to dominance and courtship. While courting, a male usually purrs deeply, swaying and circling the female, a behavior called “rumblestrutting.”
- **Squealing or shrieking** - a high pitched sound of discontent, in response to pain or danger.
- **Chattering** is made by rapidly gnashing the teeth and is generally a sign of warning. It can be a prelude to aggression or just an expression of irritation. Guinea pigs tend to raise their heads when making this sound.
- **Chutting and Whining** - are sounds made in pursuit situations, chutting by the pursuer, and whining by the one being chased.
- **Bubbling or Purring Sound** - means the guinea pig is enjoying itself, such as when being petted or held. It also may make this sound when grooming, crawling around to investigate a new place, or when being fed.



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