



Campbelltown Veterinary Hospital

Veterinary Surgeons

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Feeding your Guinea Pig

Guinea Pigs (or Cavies) are cute little creatures but they are not easy to feed correctly. Most animals have a specific enzyme that enables them to make Vitamin C. Guinea pigs do not, and are the only species, apart from humans, that require Vitamin C in their diet.

What should you feed your guinea pig?

A guinea pig's main diet may consist of good quality fresh guinea pig pellets. You can buy these from a produce agent or a pet shop, but you need to make sure they are fresh to ensure a proper level of Vitamin C.

Give your cavy plenty of variety in its diet. Providing guinea pigs with fresh fruits and vegetables is not only good for them but it also keeps them busy and contented. Many guinea pigs love lettuce, oranges, and tomatoes. Stick to dark-leafed lettuces such as Romaine and only give iceberg lettuce occasionally because of its low nutritional value and propensity to cause diarrhoea. Guinea pigs will happily gobble a variety of other vegetables too, but you need to experiment as each Cavy is different and they are often very fussy. Avoid spinach and beet greens due to their oxalic acid content, which may cause bladder stones. Providing lucerne hay or chaff is beneficial. The hay is best fed in a hayrack attached to their cage wall.

All about Vitamin C

Like humans, guinea pigs will suffer from 'scurvy' if not given vitamin C in their diet. A vitamin C deficiency will cause the guinea pig to be lethargic and weak, eat less, lose weight and may have enlarged limb joints. It develops a rough hair coat, diarrhoea and produces a discharge from its eyes and nose. Death usually occurs in about three to four weeks. Signs will occur about two weeks after the deficiency starts.

So, cavies require 10mg of vitamin C per kilogram of body weight. As most cavies are about one kilogram in weight, or a bit less, you will need to give each about 10mg of vitamin C a day. If you have a pregnant cavy, it should be given three times this much.

Good quality guinea pig pellets should contain adequate vitamin C. However, Vitamin C breaks down in food quickly so the pellets should be fresh. If the pellets are older than three months, they will not contain enough vitamin C. Don't feed your cavy on rabbit or rodent pellets, as they are not likely to contain enough vitamin C.

You can add vitamin C to the water at the rate of 200mg per litre. However, if the water container is an open dish, the vitamin C will decrease by half over a



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twenty-four hour period. If the water dish is made of metal or if organic material such as old food or excreta is present in the water, then the vitamin C will decrease more quickly.

Supplementing your guinea pigs with specific foods rich in vitamin C is important. Suitable foods, in the order of highest concentration of vitamin C, are dandelion greens (wash them first), kale, brussel sprouts, parsley, broccoli leaves, cauliflower, strawberries, broccoli florets, oranges or cabbage. Note that oranges and brussel sprouts. A cup of dandelion greens or brussel sprouts will provide about 200mg of vitamin C.

Hygiene

Guinea pigs are slobbers when it comes to table manners and etiquette. They scatter their bedding into their food, their food into their water, their water into their bedding and if that's not enough they often soil in their food, water and bedding too! For this reason, their food and water containers must be cleaned out and restocked daily.

To prevent the pigs from nesting in their food and water containers, it is best if the containers are suspended above the ground. If this is not possible, provide them with heavy food and water containers that cannot be overturned. Placing a low cover over the containers may prevent them from dancing the 'Guinea Pig Jig' in their rations.

You will find water bottles for guinea pigs available at pet shops. These are hygienic but guinea pigs will often block the end of the water tube with slurry of food and water from their mouths as they drink. For this reason, their water containers must be checked daily.

Did you know that...?

- The average life span of a guinea pig is five years.
- Male guinea pigs are called boars, females are called sows and young are called piglets – but they are related to rodents not pigs!
- Half a million guinea pigs are used in the USA yearly for research.
- Length of pregnancy is quite long – from 59 to 72 days – and a sow will often double her weight during pregnancy and she will produce about three to four young per litter.
- Guinea pigs are native to the Andes Mountains.
- Guinea pigs are related to chinchillas and porcupines.