

Keep your little "piggy" perky

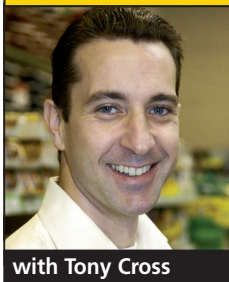
Guinea pigs are cuddly, lively, inquisitive and uncomplicated. And they haven't just been the cute little favourites of children for a long time. Grown-ups are also valuing their company more and more. Experts from the specialist retail chain Maxi Zoo explain how to keep guinea pigs in a manner appropriate to their species.

Guinea pigs are very sociable creatures and should not be kept on their own under any circumstances. The simplest solution is to keep young females and neutered young males together. Groups of un-neutered young males also work. Dwarf rabbits do not make good companions since they "speak a completely different language". The guinea pig is most likely to come off worst from such "friendships".

These animals are active during the day and need lots of room to run around so that they don't become fat and prone to illness. The larger the cage, the better: minimum dimensions should total around 100 x 60 x 40 cm (L x W x H). The floor area should be approx. 1 square metre to cater for several animals. To avoid a build up of harmful bacteria, owners should change the floor covering two to three times a week and wash out the cage with hot water once a month. Running around should not be constricted to just behind bars, a daily roam around the home provides essential variety. Always keep an eye on your pet to make sure that it is not nibbling on any electric cable or hasn't become trapped somewhere. Caution with bright floor surfaces. White makes little guinea pigs very stressed. Therefore, cover with a dark blanket or rug.

Guinea pigs have very heightened senses, they have good hearing, respond to their names or can determine which family member is approaching from

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with Tony Cross

the sound made. Their sense of smell is also outstanding. Therefore, do not house your pet in an area plagued by cigarette smoke or the smell of cooking. They should not be placed next to blaring televisions or loudspeakers either. Draughts are also harmful to guinea pigs. damp/cold environments and low temperatures are not suitable for small rodents. A temperature of 20 degrees is ideal for them. You can brush a guinea pig to groom its coat but never bathe it!

Ensure that the cage always contains somewhere for the animals to retreat to, a little house or hidey-hole. These must be large enough to fit all the cage inhabitants at one time.

Guinea pigs need to have hay permanently available for feeding on. Always provide fresh water for them to drink. Special food supplements containing essential nutrients, such as

vitamin C for example, can be obtained from specialist shops. Small portions of vegetables or fresh greenery make great little treats. Wood from fruit trees or wooden gnawing blocks helps the animal to shorten its teeth. Hard bread, on the other hand, softens very quickly in the mouth and is of no benefit to the teeth at all. On the contrary, it also causes the guinea pig to ingest less hay that performs an essential, abrasive function on the teeth and the Carbohydrate contained in it damages digestion too. Cabbage or too much fresh grass can lead to fatal flatulence.

Guinea pigs are neither toys nor cuddly animals. They have individual needs and require tender, loving attention each day.

