

Guinea Pig Profile: In-Depth

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What is a Guinea Pig?

Guinea pigs are not pigs at all, but loveable little rodents. Guinea pigs came to North America from South America. Today they are prized as gentle family pets, with thirteen recognized breeds.

The origin of the name guinea pig is not fully known. Some suggest the name "pig" comes from the pig-like squealing sound the animals make when alarmed. The source of the word "guinea" is of lesser certainty. One theory is that Dutch sailors named the animals "guinea" because they obtained the little "pigs" in Dutch Guinea. Another theory is that "guinea" is a corrupted form of "coney," a term common to an earlier era that was used for several different rabbit-like animals. No one theory has universal acceptance.

Guinea pigs are usually 8-10" in length, although some can reach up to 15 inches. Males usually weigh around 2-1/2 pounds, and females slightly less. Guinea pigs live to be 5-7 years of age, though some have lived longer. Guinea pigs are herbivores, meaning that they eat only plants. Along with rabbits and most other rodents, guinea pigs have a unique digestive practice called coprophagy: eating their own feces. They actually eat only certain feces, called cecotropes, that are specially formed in the digestive tract.

As unattractive as that sounds to us, small animals and rodents that practice coprophagy do so for nutritional reasons. Their digestive tracts work in such a way that re-ingesting partially digested food sources is required for them to absorb protein and certain vitamins essential to their well being. Eating a balanced diet that includes grasses, and [Timothy Hay or Mini-Bales](#) is a must for the unique digestive requirements of guinea pigs.

Vitamin C supplementation is also required to maintain guinea pig health. Like humans, guinea pigs cannot produce Vitamin C as many other animals can. Therefore Vitamin C must be supplied from Vitamin C fortified guinea pig [pellets](#) and fresh vegetables. Guinea pigs are also "chewers" with teeth that grow continuously throughout their lifespan. So providing Chew Toys not only relieves their boredom, but also keeps their teeth healthy and trimmed.

Guinea pigs make excellent family pets that thrive when given proper care and nutrition suited to their unique needs.

