

Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pet Guinea Pigs - Explained

The following has been obtained from the gov.gg website and is the official Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pet Guinea Pigs as issued by the States Veterinary Officer and forms part of the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance, 2012. At the end of this Code is an explanation of exactly what it means and how you can adhere to it.

CODE OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WELFARE OF PET GUINEA PIGS

DUTY OF CARE TO A PET GUINEA PIG UNDER THE ANIMAL WELFARE (GUERNSEY) ORDINANCE, 2012

Section 8 of the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance, 2012 provides that the owner or keeper of an animal owes a duty to take such care as, in all circumstances, is reasonable to see that the animal is free -

- from thirst, hunger and malnutrition,
- from discomfort,
- from pain, injury and disease,
- from fear and distress, and
- to express normal behaviour patterns.

In determining what care is reasonable in all the circumstances described above, the owner or keeper of an animal shall have particular regard to -

- A. good practice for the care of the animal in question,
- (b) any lawful purpose for which the animal is kept,
- (c) any lawful activity carried on in relation to the animal,
- (d) the physical activity undertaken by the animal,
- (e) seasonal climatic conditions,
- (f) the life-stage of the animal, and
- (g) any special or additional dietary and nutritional requirements that may arise -
- A. where the animal is pregnant, brooding or rearing young, and
- (ii) from the general state of health of the animal.

"normal behaviour patterns" means normal behaviour patterns for a domestic animal or a captive animal, as the case may be, of the kind concerned.

The duty of care includes providing the animal with-

(a) a supply of fresh drinking water and food of sufficient quantity and quality to keep the animal in good health,

(b) where appropriate, suitable shelter which is sufficient to maintain the animal in good health and such shelter must include -

A. access from the shelter to water and food,

(ii) sufficient space for the animal to lie down or otherwise rest in comfort, and

(iii) where appropriate, adequate light, heat and ventilation,

(c) protection from injury, disease or unnecessary suffering including, where appropriate, providing timely and appropriate medical diagnosis and treatment where necessary by a recognised veterinary surgeon, and

(d) the opportunity to express normal behaviour patterns and living conditions that are conducive to maintaining those normal behaviour patterns.

The Welfare Recommendations below provide practical guidance on meeting this duty of care when caring for a pet guinea pig.

RECOMMENDATIONS MADE UNDER SECTION 13(1) OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE (GUERNSEY) ORDINANCE, 2012 FOR THE WELFARE OF PET GUINEA PIGS

A FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH THE WELFARE RECOMMENDATIONS MAY BE RELIED UPON IN COURT AS TENDING TO ESTABLISH LIABILITY FOR FAILING TO MEET THE DUTY OF CARE

RECOMMENDATIONS - FOOD AND WATER

1. A guinea pig should be provided with food that contains the correct balance of essential nutrients, in sufficient quantity to keep it, in all circumstances, in good health and vigour.

2. A guinea pig should be provided with fresh, clean water in sufficient quantity to keep it, in all circumstances, hydrated.

RECOMMENDATIONS - LIVING ENVIRONMENT

3. As a minimum a guinea pig should be provided with living accommodation that -

a. is large enough to allow it to lie down and rest or sleep in a natural position and have a separate space for it to exercise,

b. is predator and vermin proof, dry, ventilated, but protected from draughts and which provides protection from direct sunlight and extremes of heat and cold,

c. has an enclosed sleeping area or shelter that is large enough for it to sleep and rest in a natural posture,

d. is large enough to provide it with space, other than the place in which it rests and sleeps, to stand up on four legs, stand up on its back legs and turn around in a normal posture and to exercise,

e. provides it with shelter that is predator proof, dry, ventilated, but protected from draughts and which provides protection from direct sunlight and extremes of heat and cold,

f. provides daylight or light equivalent to daylight during normal daylight hours,

g. allows continuous access to water and appropriate access to food (to ensure it receives a sufficient quantity of food as required to meet the duty of care), and

h. is constructed from materials that are not hazardous to guinea pigs.

4. Living accommodation should be provided with dust-free nesting and bedding material and bedding material should cover the floor of the accommodation. Nesting and bedding material must not have been treated with substances which are hazardous to the health of guinea pigs.

RECOMMENDATIONS - HEALTH

5. A guinea pig that is injured or ill should be provided with timely and appropriate treatment for the injury or illness or in the case of a serious injury or illness, medical diagnosis and treatment by a veterinary surgeon. In the case of doubt, advice should be obtained from a veterinary surgeon.

6. Veterinary medicines or treatments should only be administered in accordance with the directions of a veterinary surgeon or a person authorised to supply such products, or in the case of products that can be purchased by the general public, in accordance with the directions of the manufacturer of the product.

7. A guinea pig should be provided with protection from temperatures that exceed 25°C.

8. Hazardous substances should be kept out of the areas to which a guinea pig normally has access.

9. A guinea pig should be protected from hazardous appliances (household and garden) by keeping such appliances out of the areas to which it normally has access or by using measures to ensure it does not suffer harm from the appliances.

10. A guinea pig should be given the opportunity to exercise to keep it in good health and vigour.

11. A guinea pig's coat should be checked regularly for external parasites and, if necessary, parasites treated.

12. A guinea pig's nails should be checked regularly and excessive growth should be clipped.

13. A guinea pig should be provided with untreated wood or twigs to gnaw on to prevent its teeth from becoming overgrown.

14. A guinea pig should be handled so as to avoid distress or injury.

15. Food and water containers that are provided for a guinea pig should be kept clean of waste food, droppings and other contamination.

RECOMMENDATIONS - BEHAVIOUR

16. A guinea pig should be provided with the opportunity to regularly socialise with its owner or keeper or other guinea pigs.

17. Guinea pigs that fight when kept together should be provided with separate accommodation.

RECOMMENDATIONS - BREEDING

18. Only a guinea pig that is adult, well developed, in good health and condition and with a favourable temperament should be used for breeding.

19. A pregnant female should be separated from other guinea pigs late in the last trimester (last 3 weeks) of pregnancy and housed separately. It should be provided with an area that is safe, warm, dry and quiet and also provided with clean bedding material. It should be inspected frequently to ensure that it is not experiencing difficulties, but otherwise disturbed as little as possible. If a female exhibits any signs of significant difficulties, during pregnancy or birth, veterinary assistance should be sought promptly.

20. A young guinea pig should be able to feed independently and be in good health and condition before it is re-homed.

RECOMMENDATION - EXHIBITING GUINEA PIGS

21. A guinea pig that is exhibited must be at least 3 months of age, in good health and free from injuries or skin parasites. A pregnant guinea pig should not be exhibited.

RECOMMENDATIONS - TRANSPORTATION

22. A guinea pig that is transported in a vehicle should be restrained in a secure container.

23. A travelling container should be large enough to allow a guinea pig to stand up, turn around and lie down with ease. It should be provided with bedding and food, including moisture-rich food. The container should be secured within the vehicle and positioned so that a guinea pig is not exposed to extremes of temperature, drafts or

high humidity.

24. A guinea pig should not be left unattended in a vehicle unless the environment within the vehicle is maintained below 25°C air temperature in the shade.

Guidance - What this code actually means.

Food and Water

When it comes to feeding your guinea pig, it's important to remember that they're herbivores, meaning they thrive on a plant-based diet rich in fibre. The foundation of their diet should consist of high-quality hay or fresh grass, which helps with digestion and wears down their ever-growing teeth. Alongside hay, offer a variety of fresh greens and vegetables—think leafy greens and root veggies like carrots—every day.

Guinea pigs are unique in that they cannot produce their own vitamin C, so it's crucial to make sure they're getting enough through their diet to avoid health issues. You can achieve this by feeding them fresh vegetables, specially formulated guinea pig food, and perhaps vitamin C supplements. Be aware, though, that standard guinea pig food often doesn't provide enough of this essential vitamin on its own.

Guinea pigs also tend to pick and choose when given a mixed food, so offering plain pelleted feed helps prevent them from only eating their favourites and missing out on key nutrients. Make sure to serve their food in a sturdy, heavy dish to prevent tipping or spilling.

When it comes to water, fresh, clean drinking water should always be available. The best way to provide it is through a water bottle with a sipper tube and ball bearing. This prevents contamination that could happen if water bowls are tipped over or get filled with bedding and droppings. And don't forget to check that the water hasn't frozen in cold weather.

Living Environment

For their housing, guinea pigs need a safe, secure, and spacious setup. Ideally, their enclosure should be escape-proof, and protected from predators and vermin. It should also include a sheltered area that takes up at least one-third of the total space, allowing all your guinea pigs to cozy up and hide when they want.

In addition to shelter, guinea pigs need enough room to move around and stretch out. For adult guinea pigs, this typically means about 0.9 square meters of floor space. The enclosure should allow them to stand on their hind legs without their heads touching

the roof and should give them enough room to lie down fully without touching the sides.

The enclosure should have a solid floor, not wire mesh, to avoid injuries to their feet. It should be well-ventilated, free from dampness, and shielded from drafts. Avoid using any materials that could be harmful to guinea pigs, like painted or treated wood. Ideally, the housing should have access to natural light but also provide shaded areas to protect from direct sunlight.

If you use wire mesh, it must be sturdy enough to keep your guinea pig's feet safe and to keep out pests. Outdoor hutches need to be weatherproof, raised off the ground to prevent dampness, and placed in areas protected from extreme weather conditions, drafts, fumes, and the harsh midday sun.

Outdoor Runs

Guinea pigs love to explore and exercise, so having an outdoor run is great for them. Ideally, your guinea pig should have daily access to a run that's separate from their living space. This run should be made of solid materials, with some covered areas to protect them from the wind, rain, or sun. The floor should be natural (not wire), allowing your guinea pigs to dig, which is a natural behaviour. If you're worried about them digging up your lawn, you could offer them a digging pit, like a large tray filled with earth.

For reference, a good outdoor run should be around 180 cm long, 100 cm wide, and 60 cm high. It's essential to secure the run to the ground if you think predators, like dogs, might try to get in.

Bedding Materials

When it comes to bedding, guinea pigs need something that provides warmth and insulation. The base layer should be absorbent, such as soft wood shavings, meadow hay, shredded paper, or synthetic fleece fabric. On top, provide good quality hay or straw. Make sure all bedding is dust-free to avoid any respiratory issues and hasn't been treated with harmful chemicals.

Temperature Considerations

Guinea pigs can tolerate the cold well as long as they stay dry. In colder months, make sure they have plenty of clean, dry bedding and that their sleeping areas are insulated. Outdoor hutches may need to be moved indoors or to a more sheltered spot

during the winter. If you're keeping their hutch in a shed or outbuilding, ensure there's enough ventilation to prevent dampness and humidity.

Hot weather is far more dangerous for guinea pigs, as they are prone to heat stress. Their housing should never be placed in direct sunlight. If temperatures rise above 24°C, you'll need to take precautions like moving their hutch into the shade, using fans or air conditioning, or covering the hutch with a damp cloth to cool things down.

Enrichment

Guinea pigs love exploring and need mental stimulation, so providing environmental enrichment is key. Items like pipes or platforms to climb on, and plenty of loose hay for burrowing, help keep them entertained and happy.

Monitoring Your Guinea Pig's Health

Keeping a close eye on your guinea pig's health is essential, and it's a good idea to check on them every day. You'll want to make sure they're:

- **Eating and Drinking Well:** Look for their food bowl to be empty and their water bottle full. They should be munching happily on hay and veggies!
- **Regular Bathroom Habits:** Keep an eye on their droppings and urine. Healthy guinea pigs will produce both regularly.
- **Inquisitive and Active:** Watch for those curious little behaviours—if they're exploring their space and showing interest in their surroundings, that's a good sign!
- **Moving Freely:** They should be darting around comfortably, not limping or struggling.
- **Coat Condition:** A healthy guinea pig has a shiny coat and shouldn't be scratching or itching excessively.

Dealing with Parasites

Just like any pet, guinea pigs can get pesky parasites. Lice and mange mites can be a problem, and fungal infections can crop up, especially around their cute little faces. If you notice any signs, it's crucial to consult your vet for the right treatment, whether it's medication or specialised products.

Handling Injuries

Accidents happen! It's not uncommon for guinea pigs to poke themselves in the eye with hay or have little bits of hayseed get stuck. If you notice anything lodged in their eye and it looks uncomfortable, you can gently remove it yourself if it's not too serious. However, if their eyelids aren't fully opening or they seem in distress, it's time for a vet visit.

Minor injuries like torn ears from a little scuffle can be managed at home. Just keep the area clean with a diluted salt solution. But if you see something more severe, don't hesitate to reach out to a veterinarian.

Watch for Illness

Sometimes guinea pigs can develop abscesses that may burst, and these need to be cleaned with a warm salt solution. If the healing seems slow, consult your vet. You might also hear your guinea pig making a "ruttling" noise, which can be harmless or a sign of respiratory infection—definitely worth getting checked out.

Older males might experience complications with their bowel habits, so keeping their rear end clean is important. Diarrhoea can often be linked to diet, but if it persists, seeking veterinary advice is key.

If your guinea pig seems unwell and you can't pinpoint the cause, or if basic first-aid measures aren't working, don't hesitate to contact your vet.

Nail and Teeth Care

Overgrown nails? No problem! Just clip them, leaving about 5 mm of the dead nail. If you're unsure how to do this safely, ask your vet for guidance.

Those little chompers of theirs—their incisor teeth—grow continuously, so they need plenty of things to gnaw on like wood blocks or branches (just ensure they're untreated!). Regularly checking their front teeth for overgrowth is also a good habit.

Quarantine New Arrivals

If you're bringing home a new guinea pig, give it a two-week quarantine before introducing it to your other pets. This helps ensure everyone stays healthy and disease-free.

Keeping Their Home Clean

Guinea pigs are pretty tidy creatures, but their space needs to be kept clean. Make sure to refresh their bedding weekly and more often if it gets wet or dirty. Daily checks on their food and water bowls are also essential, along with removing any uneaten greens to keep everything fresh and safe.

Handling Your Guinea Pig

Guinea pigs thrive on gentle handling. To lift them, scoop them up with one hand supporting their body and the other resting on their shoulders. With calm and consistent handling, they can become incredibly affectionate companions!

Understanding Their Behaviour

Guinea pigs are social animals by nature, so keeping them in pairs or groups is ideal. If you have more than one, ensure they're the same sex, or if they're mixed, that one is neutered to avoid unwanted litters. Watch for signs of aggression, especially with males, and separate them if needed.

Territorial Nature

Be mindful that adult guinea pigs can be territorial. When introducing new members to the group, do so on neutral ground, like a freshly cleaned cage, to ease tensions.

Breeding Guidelines

If you're considering breeding your guinea pigs, it's crucial to plan ahead and ensure you have homes lined up for the little ones. Neutering is a wise choice if breeding isn't in your plans.

For breeding, make sure your female guinea pig, or sow, is at least six months old and in good health. Males should also be mature enough before breeding, usually around four months.

Caring for Pregnant Sows

When your female is expecting, it's best to separate her from other guinea pigs in the last three weeks of pregnancy. They need a comfortable, secure place to raise their young, and exercise is vital to keep her healthy. A nutrient-rich diet is essential during this time to support her and her pups.

Handling Young Pups

Guinea pigs usually make wonderful mothers. If the pups aren't thriving or aren't seen suckling, consult your vet about supplemental feeding. Weaning can start around three to four weeks, and it's important to ensure they're healthy and active before moving them to new homes.

Exhibiting Your Guinea Pig

If you're showing your guinea pig, ensure they're at least three months old, in great health, and free of any injuries. Pregnant sows shouldn't be exhibited. Make sure to provide plenty of hay and water, and handle them regularly to minimise stress.

Transporting Your Guinea Pig

When transporting your guinea pig, always ensure they're healthy. Sick or injured animals should only travel to the vet. Keep an eye on the temperature—avoid transporting them in heat above 24°C unless you have air conditioning. Proper carriers with ventilation are essential, and if it's a long journey, provide water-rich foods like fruits and veggies.

Never leave your guinea pig unattended in a vehicle, especially in hot weather, unless you can keep it cool. Their safety and comfort should always come first!