



Are Guinea Pigs for Me?

Guinea pigs need more care and have more delicate needs than most people realise. Before choosing your first guinea pigs, it is vital to have done your research and taken the time to understand the species, so you are fully aware of what these animals require in order to live happy and healthy lives, and of what will be required of you. You must consider multiple factors if you think you would like to take on guinea pigs.

What Guinea Pigs Need

You will spend, on average, at least **one to two hours a day** attending to your guinea pigs needs. This can involve cleaning the cage/hutch, supervising exercise time, preparing and serving food, and simply spending time with them: giving them cuddles and talking to them. The more guinea pigs you have, the more time you will need to spend with them to ensure each individual has had its physical and emotional needs met. Day to day, guinea pigs need:

- At least one other friend of their own species - guinea pigs should live in groups of two or more, and should **never** be housed with animals of any other species (no, not even rabbits!);
- A large cage with suitable bedding;
- Appropriate accessories – food bowls, water bottles, hideys, tunnels, toys;
- Fresh water at least once a day;
- Plenty of hay, topped up or refreshed at least once daily;
- A good quality dried food;
- A wide variety of fresh fruits and veggies in small amounts, once or twice daily;
- Exercise time outside the cage, minimum of one hour per day;
- Cuddles, love and attention;
- A visual inspection and physical feel of the animals to check that they are healthy and behaving normally.

The average lifespan of guinea pigs is 5-7 years, but some can live up to 10 years or even slightly longer. You must provide daily care throughout their lives. They are live animals who have needs and who will feel the negative effects of any pain and neglect. It is a big responsibility; no less than if you took on a dog or cat.

Do try to plan ahead when you are thinking about integrating guinea pigs into your life and see what situations you can predict in the coming years. If you are a teenager currently at secondary school, consider if you are likely to want to apply to university in a few years. If you are with a long-term partner, consider if you plan to expand your human family in the near future. If you have a good job, consider the implications on your home life – on your ability to provide for your pets - if you are offered a promotion or a move.

Some things you can't plan for and you can't foresee, and in most situations the family is able to adapt and ensure the guinea pigs continue to receive all the care they need, but being aware of likely (or unlikely) future events is a useful step to go over prior to deciding whether guinea pigs are for you at this particular point in time.

Considering Your Situation - Home Life & Work

Q: Are you a minor (under 18) and/or someone who relies financially on their parents?

If so, you **must** guarantee your parents co-operation and support in the care of the guinea pigs.



Even if the whole family has agreed that a minor will care for the animals day to day, it is legally and morally the **parents' responsibility** to make sure the animals' welfare is being maintained. A minor must also be able to call on their parents at any moment to provide financial assistance, whether for day to day needs or in an emergency to cover veterinary fees. In short, the parents need to be fully supportive and act responsibly when bringing the guineas into the home.

Rescue centres purposely will never sign an animal over into a minor's name, vets will not register animals under a minor's name, and pet shops are not allowed to sell live animals to under 16s, so a responsible adult must be supportive and involved in the guinea pigs care from the very beginning.

Q: Are there children in the household?

How old are the children? Are they in good health? Do they have any known allergies? Have you got time to look after at least two guinea pigs, as well as maintaining your role as parent to the children? How will you ensure the safety of the animals, especially when young children are around? Are you likely to have more children?

Q: Do you share your household with others?

Do your housemates have any allergies, or even fears of small animals? Can you ensure your guinea pigs will be trusted and safe either around, or in the hands of, everyone within the house? If you are called away for any reason, will any of your housemates step in and take over the care of the guinea pigs until you get back?

Q: Do you attend school/college/university?

Have you got the time to look after guineas as well as keeping up with important coursework or exam revision? What are your future education plans - is it possible to fit your guineas into that? Some university dormitories do not allow pets - think about what you would do if faced with that situation and discuss with your parents to come up with a Plan B, if Plan A of taking them with you is not possible.

Q: Do you work?

Will you have the time and energy to attend to the needs of your piggies after a long day at work? Does your work take you away from home for any length of time? If you have to travel for work, can you easily get someone in to look after the guinea pigs, and can you afford to pay them to do so?

Q: How are your finances?

Are you in a good financial position? Can you afford the initial setup costs, the day to day care of piggies, and can you save up regularly for potential future veterinary bills?

Q: Do you have other pets?

If you have other pets, especially any that are larger than guinea pigs (cats, dogs, rabbits), can you ensure the safety of the guinea pigs? Are any of your other pets aggressive toward - or uncomfortable with - other animals (of their own, or other, species)? How do you cope with fulfilling the needs of all your other pets; will you have the time to care for two or more guineas each day as well, with their own cage and their own set of needs?

Q: Do you ever go away on holiday?



If so, are you willing to pay an experienced petsitter, rescue or holiday boarding centre to mind your piggies while you are away? Have you got friends or family you can trust with the care of the animals? If possible can you minimise the disruption to the pets by leaving them at home but having someone come in several times a day to check on them and serve their needs?

Q: Are you willing to look around for a good vet?

Guinea pigs require medical care from those with experience and training; it may be a surprise to learn that not every veterinarian has received training on guinea pigs, which unfortunately – through no fault of their own – negatively impacts their knowledge on the species-specific idiosyncrasies and their ability to diagnose and safely treat certain problems. It is a fault that occurs at the most fundamental level, a gap sadly overlooked by the training body. Some vets have however racked up a great deal of post-graduate experience with guinea pigs. Some take extra courses and workshops, others see a lot of guinea pigs and as such have learned a lot direct from the animals themselves, and others are simply more open to owners doing their own research and coming up with notions for the vet to consider and to discuss with other vets who perhaps are more qualified. Knowing all that, are you willing to put yourself in the position of politely asking your local vets on their experience and success with guinea pigs, or are you able to travel a distance to see a particularly reputable, skilled and trusted vet?

The Informal But Useful Guinea Pig Quiz

It is important that you make the right decision on whether guinea pigs are the right animal for you. I have devised a rudimentary but deliberately precise short quiz for you to take, to see if your answers match those that most guinea pig owners would agree you need to understand in order to begin your journey being the best guinea pig owner you can be.

Q: How long have you wanted guinea pigs for?

- A: Less than two weeks;
- B: Less than one month;
- C: More than one month.

Q: How much research have you done on piggies and their care?

- A: None;
- B: I've read one or two things;
- C: I've read a few books, and looked at a few reputable websites/joined a forum/spoken to other guinea pig owners.

Q: Do you want pets who...

- A: Are always very outgoing, friendly and settled;
- B: Do not need any human socialisation;
- C: Need human interaction and reward this with gradual increases in confidence and bravery?

Q: How much can you afford to spend on fresh veggies each week?

- A: None - they can eat what I eat!
- B: I'm limited - I can only manage two or three foods for them each week;
- C: Fairly flexible - I am willing to buy whatever meets their nutritional needs and tastes.

Now see the verdict...



Mostly As: Guinea pigs are almost definitely not the ideal pet for you. Perhaps spend more time researching, speak to more people and visit a rescue to find out what guineas are like as a species before deciding.

Mostly Bs: You're certainly on the right track, but I would advise taking your time to do more research and to build up your resources a bit before committing.

Mostly Cs: Guinea pigs seem like they could be good pets for you! Make sure you have thought about everything in this advice sheet, read the other advice sheets in this series, keep researching, talk to some rescues and keep your eye out for piggies in need of homes!

Remember this article and quiz is not a definitive guide to who should/should not take on guinea pigs, but everything mentioned in this article is important to take note of and consider. Taking on guinea pigs when you are not in the right position to do so is not only detrimental to the guinea pigs, but to yourself, too.

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