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THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT KEEPING GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs originated in South America but were probably introduced into Europe soon after the first Spanish explorers returned from that continent in the 1500s. Even though they came from a tropical area these rodents proved to be. They became favorite pets in the early part of this century and are also bred as show animals with a wide variety of coat colors and fur types. Feeding your guinea pig is covered in a separate leaflet - here we cover housing and breeding.



Housing

This is not particularly difficult and a large variety of hutches and cages have been used. Guinea pigs should be kept indoors as warmer weather [anything above 80 F (27 C)] can cause fatal heat stroke. Indoor cages should allow at least 0.2 square meters of floor space per guinea pig. Since they are social animals guinea pigs can be kept in small to medium groups, but clearly mating will increase the number of animals so single sex groups (or neutered and spayed pets) are advisable. Temperatures between 65-80 degrees F are ideal. Anything over 80 F (27 C) will lead to heat stroke, especially in animals that are overweight or pregnant.

Breeding

Guinea pigs, like chinchillas, are one of a group of rodents called the hystricomorphs with an unusual reproductive physiology and breeding strategy.

Guinea pigs mature at around three months but should not be used for breeding for another three months. After about eight months of age the female guinea pig's pelvic bones become more tightly fused and if she has not had a litter by that time, producing young can be more of a problem. You might ask why that is a problem since animals of most species can delay giving birth until they are older. The difference with the guinea pig is that she gives birth not to a large litter of tiny immature young (as the rat or mouse does), but to between two and four fully developed well-furred offspring. The average gestation period is 63 days. These large babies have a hard time getting through the pelvic canal unless the mother's pelvic bones are relatively immature and malleable. These large offspring predispose the mother to pregnancy toxemia. This is a metabolic disorder resulting in low blood calcium and high blood pressure. It manifests as loss of appetite in the early stages, deteriorating to muscle twitching and coma. Prompt

veterinary attention can save animals but the problem can be reduced to a minimum by providing plenty of water and green foods during pregnancy, as throughout life.

There is a relatively high incidence of dead babies and if the gestation should continue over 70 days, it is likely that the litter will be born dead. Interestingly the guinea pig, along with other hystricomorph rodents, starts off with a much larger set of fetuses in her uterus but many of them die before birth, many very early on but some late in gestation or even at birth. The reason is unclear but it may be a mechanism of producing the maximum number of babies for a limited and varying food supply.



As with many rodents the female guinea pig will be able to mate within a few hours of giving birth. She should not be allowed to, however, since it is much better that she has time to replenish her metabolic reserves before becoming pregnant again. If your guinea pig has a large litter of over three or four piglets it is worth fostering some off on another sow, since guinea pigs have only two nipples to suckle their offspring.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Rick Axelson, DVM & Shawn Messonnier, DVM
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