



Did you know that guinea pigs are social animals? They prefer living in pairs or small groups and benefit greatly from having the company of other guinea pigs. Here is some information to help you learn about the needs of these small animals if you are looking to adopt.

Social Needs

Guinea pigs have evolved to live in small groups and communicate with each other through different vocalizations and body language. Their need for social interaction with others of their species remains, even when kept as companion animals. Providing opportunities for social interaction are beneficial for the health and welfare of guinea pigs, whereas a lack of companionship can be stressful and detrimental.

It is important that guinea pigs are socialized early in life to learn how to interact appropriately with other guinea pigs. If they are not socialized until later in life, it can make future introductions to other guinea pigs more difficult.

However, it is possible to transition a guinea pig from living alone to social living by facilitating a safe and slow introduction.

Compatibility Considerations

We recommend that you keep your guinea pig with at least one other to promote good welfare, but it is important that your guinea pigs are compatible with each other. If your guinea pig has been housed alone and you are planning to introduce them to another guinea pig, here are some considerations:

- If you currently have a male guinea pig, avoid getting another male as they may have conflicts over resources. Spayed female guinea pigs are recommended as good companions.
- If you plan to keep a group of three or more guinea pigs, it is preferable to have one male and multiple females. This emulates a natural environment where social groups would consist of one male and several females.
- If you currently have a female guinea pig, getting a neutered male is recommended. You could also get another female guinea pig, just be cautious that females can also have conflicts with each other.
- If you are introducing a male and a female guinea pig, ensure they are spayed/neutered so that they do not reproduce. If you are unsure of your guinea pig's sex, do not hesitate to reach out to a veterinarian for a consultation.



Introductions

When you decide which guinea pigs you are going to introduce to each other, plan to invest two to three weeks evaluating their compatibility. If you are introducing guinea pigs, here are some steps for making the introductions as safe and low-stress, as possible:

- For the first week or two, do not house the guinea pigs in the same area where they can see or interact with one another. An initial separation or quarantine period helps to prevent guinea pigs from transmitting disease to one another. Monitor the guinea pigs for any signs of illness, such as:
 - Nasal discharge
 - Itching
 - Diarrhea
 - Sneezing
 - Wheezing
 - Hair loss
 - Decreased appetite
 - Lethargy

NOTE: Always wash your hands between handling guinea pigs.

- After the quarantine period, with no observed signs of illness, start with “scent swapping” items. Keep the guinea pigs housed in different areas and slowly start to exchange their items (e.g. bedding, hutches, etc.) over a few days so they can begin to smell their new partner.
- If the guinea pigs have no adverse reactions (such as showing signs of aggression or hiding) to the exchanged items, the next step is to move their runs or enclosures closer to each other. Allowing your guinea pigs to see one another, but not yet physically interact.
- Over the next few days, begin to move their runs or enclosures closer together until they are side by side. This allows them to see, smell, and communicate with each other but still not physically interact. Positive behaviours may include:
 - Sudden jumps (i.e. popcorning)
 - Sniffing
 - Spending time at the barrier dividing them
- If they show positive behaviours, the next step is to find and set-up a neutral space for a physical introduction. A neutral space might be an outdoor run in your backyard or a spare room in your household, where neither guinea pig has previously occupied. You can also place some towels down the neutral area and have hiding spaces available so they can retreat if needed.

Examples of hiding spaces are:

- Boxes
- Beds
- Tubes



NOTE: Items should be open ended so the guinea pigs do not become cornered, which can cause fear and/or aggression.

Scattering some hay or other food on the ground may also provide a good distraction for the guinea pigs during the introduction process and always ensure they both have access to water.

- Once this space is set up it is time to bring the guinea pigs in. Start them on opposite sides of the space and give them time to interact and explore. Have a barrier ready (e.g. clean dustpan or small board) in case you need to separate the guinea pigs safely and gently if they have an aggressive interaction.

NOTE: Ensure you are always present during this initial introduction to monitor their behaviour.

If you have concerns about introducing guinea pigs, do not hesitate to reach out to a veterinarian for advice or consultation.

Signs of positive interactions or behaviours

- Grooming each other (i.e. mutual grooming)
- Lying next to each other
- Sharing resources (i.e. food, water)
- Smelling each other
- Squeaking vocalizations

Negative behaviours or aggression

- Constant teeth chattering
- Biting or nipping
- Constant hiding or escaping
- Chasing
- Snorting
- Opening their mouths at each other (i.e. threat behaviour)

Some negative behaviours may occur at the beginning but if they do not lessen or begin to worsen, you should end the physical interaction and try again on a different day. It may take several sessions to start to see positive social behaviours or signs of bonding. You may need to go back a step (e.g. scent swapping) if the guinea pigs have an aggressive encounter.

If the guinea pigs continue to show negative interactions with each other over time, then it may indicate that the guinea pigs are incompatible.



Bonding

Some guinea pigs will bond quickly, while others may take longer. Each guinea pig is unique and their characteristics, such as age, sex, size, temperament, and previous socialization with other guinea pigs (if any) will be factors that affect their ability to bond with others.

Do not keep incompatible guinea pigs together. It can create an environment that is highly stressful for one or both animals and is detrimental to their health and welfare.

If your guinea pigs show consistent positive behaviours or interactions in the same space, then you can move them into a shared run or enclosure. To reduce territorial aggression, you may wish to house them in the neutral space used for introductions, or in a new space that neither guinea pig occupied previously.

Continue to monitor their behaviour in their shared run or enclosure over time to ensure the relationship remains positive.

Housing

When guinea pigs are housed together, it is important that they both have sufficient space.

This helps to reduce conflicts over resources, allows for adequate exercise, and expression of natural behaviours. Scattering food around the run or enclosure and providing at least two water sources can help to prevent resource guarding.

Recommended spacing allowances

- One to two guinea pigs = 10.5ft²
- Three guinea pigs = 13ft²
- Four guinea pigs = 16ft²

NOTE: If you can provide more space for your guinea pigs, more is always better!

Rabbits and Guinea Pigs?

It is not recommended to house guinea pigs and rabbits together. They are different species with different behavioural and health needs. The welfare concerns that may arise by housing these species together are:

- Rabbits may carry bacteria called *Bordetella bronchiseptica*, which can cause respiratory disease in guinea pigs.
- A bacteria called *E.Cuniculi* can be passed between rabbits and guinea pigs, compromising their health. It is typically carried by rabbits, who can then pass it to guinea pigs.



Small Animal Behaviour Guide Introducing Guinea Pigs



- Rabbits can seriously injure a guinea pig by kicking, if they have an aggressive or defensive interaction.

It is recommended that guinea pigs are housed with other compatible guinea pigs, to provide the best health and welfare benefits.

Did You Know?

You can also ask us general behaviour questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

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