

# Welfare spotlight on Guinea pigs



They are a popular pet for youngsters but how much do we really know about the needs of these small creatures and how can we ensure they are well looked after?

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**W**ith approximately 700,000 pet guinea pigs in the UK, are their welfare needs widely known enough? Find out how you can help your customers by encouraging best practices in guinea pig welfare.

The Pet Food Manufacturers Association's 2016 Pet Population report estimates that there are around 700,000 guinea pigs currently kept as pets in the UK, but just as with rabbits, thinking on what they need as a species has changed dramatically over the years. All is well and good if every guinea pig owner is fully aware of their pet's welfare needs, but that isn't always the case.

This is where retailers are perfectly positioned to educate and support guinea pig owners, whether they're a first-time owner or someone with years of experience, with advice about what guinea pigs really need as well as appropriate products.

should be the smallest part of a guinea pig's diet, it's really important that owners feed the right type, so ensure you stock good species-specific dry foods.

In terms of the type of dry food you sell, some customers might be drawn to mix over all-in-one pellets because it looks more

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**"Housing should be large enough for guinea pigs to run, play and exercise"**

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interesting, but mix can result in selective feeding which means the guinea pig won't be getting the right nutritional balance. While

RSPCA for guinea pig housing is 4ft x 2ft x 1.5ft for two animals, but keep in mind the adage that bigger is better – it's certainly true in this case. Housing should be large enough for guinea pigs to exercise, run and play, with a smooth floor that won't risk damaging their feet like a wire cage could.

While they can be happy either indoors or outdoors, they shouldn't be kept permanently outdoors because they get cold and damp easily, so when the weather turns cold they should either be housed within a heated shed (with access to an outdoor run), or in appropriate accommodation indoors.

Guinea pigs are sociable animals and must be housed together with other guinea pigs for companionship, so they're able to sleep



doing some research in your local area to find suitable vets, who you can then recommend to your customers.

Exhibiting normal behaviour really relies on their owners meeting the previous four needs. Guinea pigs should have enough space to be able to run around, hay to eat and burrow into, shelter to provide a hiding place if needed.

Fulfilling all these needs means happier and healthier pet guinea pigs that have a guaranteed forever home with happy owners. When owners misunderstand their pets' needs the result will often be unhappy

With advice about what guinea pigs really need as well as appropriate products for sale. Pet owners should consider the universally accepted 'five freedoms' (relating to an animal's welfare in terms of diet, environment, companionship, health and behaviour) for every aspect of their pets' life.

Guinea pigs should be constantly grazing to keep their digestive systems healthy, so just like rabbits they should have unlimited access to hay, as well as fresh food (including greens and salad veg) twice a day. While dry food


this doesn't mean you shouldn't sell mix at all, it's important that any of your customers who buy it are aware to look out for selective feeding. While pellets might not look as interesting, they do make sure the animals get everything they need.

Just as with rabbits, 'a hutch is not enough', and the days when a small hutch in the garden was the norm for small furrries such as guinea pigs should be long gone. The minimum space recommended by the

cuddled up to each other and take part in mutual grooming. It's important that guinea pigs are bonded correctly to avoid serious problems and fighting, and while reputable rescues and breeders will only ever allow bonded pairs or groups to go to new homes, your customers might sometimes need advice about choosing their new pets. Female guinea pigs can live happily together once bonded, as can males, and while mixing males and females can be difficult, it is possible.

Contrary to popular belief, rabbits are definitely not suitable companions for guinea pigs, and this mix will often lead to stress and violence between the species.

Protection from and treatment of, illness and injury. As with all pets, regular check-ups, routine treatments, and access to a vet (ideally with plenty of experience in treating guinea pigs) are essential. Finding a guinea pig competent vet isn't something that all new owners think about until they actually need to take their pet in to see one, so consider

suffering and abandonment, and support from their local retailer can go a long way when it comes to avoiding these issues. 

## How retailers can support good Guinea Pig welfare

- Selling good quality hay, feed and bedding materials
  - Selling suitable housing – 4ft x 2ft x 1.5ft as a minimum
  - Ensuring all staff understand guinea pig welfare and behaviour, so they can answer any questions customers have and give the correct product advice
  - Being able to give appropriate literature to customers to take home with them and/or direct them to appropriate online resources
  - Encouraging adoption from rescues
- <http://www.pfma.org.uk/pet-population-2016>





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