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Guinea Pigs: The Right Pet for You?

The Humane Society of the United States

Shevaun Brannigan/The HSUS

It can be tempting to acquire a guinea pig on impulse. After all, these little guys have a lot of appealing qualities; they're small, gentle, and personable, just to name a few.

A great starter pet, right? Not necessarily. Here are some important questions to consider before you dive headlong into a relationship.

Where should you get a guinea pig?

Instead of creating more demand for guinea pigs by purchasing one from a pet store, please visit your local animal shelter to adopt one ... or more! Most shelters now accept small animals who need new homes, and you will have the satisfaction of saving a life.

How much time do you have?

Guinea pigs need time out of their cage every day. Whether this time is spent stretching their legs and exploring new environments or cuddling in your lap, daily interaction and attention are essential for a guinea pig's well-being.

Guinea pigs need to be groomed regularly. Shorthaired breeds can be maintained with a once-a-week brushing while longhaired breeds require daily grooming.

A guinea pig's cage should be thoroughly cleaned on a weekly basis and spot-cleaned every few days. If you don't appreciate the smell of a dirty cage, consider how your guinea pig—who spends nearly all of her waking hours just centimeters above her bedding—feels about stinky living quarters.

Is a guinea pig right for your family?

If you're getting a guinea pig for your child, think carefully about how this animal's care will fit into your family's schedule over the long haul.

Can your son or daughter incorporate pet ownership into a busy after-school schedule and evening and weekend commitments?

Are you willing to shoulder responsibility for your pig's care if your children drop the ball?

If you have other pets, are you sure your guinea pig will get enough attention?

Do you have young children?

Young children often lack fine motor control and self-restraint, which means they may inadvertently drop a guinea pig, squeeze him, or scare him into biting. Guinea pigs require a gentle touch and may be easily startled by sudden movement and loud noises.

What's your budget?

The adoption fee or purchase price for a guinea pig is typically small, but there are significant startup costs and ongoing needs to anticipate. The initial purchase of equipment and supplies is likely to include:

Large cage or modular enclosure

Bedding material

Hidey box

Food dish

Water bottle

High-quality pellets

Timothy hay

Toys

Are you prepared to spend at least several hundred dollars a year on your new friend (not including regular veterinary costs) if your guinea pig needs to be treated for a common condition like mites or requires emergency veterinary care?

Are you willing to hire a pet sitter or board your pig when you go on vacation?

Are you willing to consider adding a second guinea pig?

Guinea pigs are social animals who do best with the companionship of another pig. Preventing a solitary guinea pig from becoming lonely and bored is a tall order, even for someone committed to spending a significant amount of time with his animal every day.

Do you know if you're allergic?

Some people are allergic to guinea pigs. These allergies are a reaction to proteins in the animal's saliva and urine (contrary to popular belief, the culprit isn't hair or dander, although they often transmit these allergens during handling and close contact). Hay and wood shavings can also cause allergies.

If you've never lived with a guinea pig, test the waters by visiting a household that includes one or spend time handling adoptable guinea pigs at your local humane society (you might meet your new best friend in the process). More about allergies to pets »

Consider lifespan

Guinea pigs live an average of five to seven years. This lifespan is longer than many other small pets such as hamsters, gerbils, mice, or rats, all of whom live only a few years. If your life is in transition, a guinea pig may be more portable than a dog or a cat, but remember that five years or more is a significant period of time.