

Handling Guinea Pigs

Our topics for this week are:

- **Normal behaviors of guinea pigs**
- **Catching and restraining guinea pigs**
- **Gender determination of guinea pigs**

Guinea pigs, also called cavies, are crepuscular, docile, and social animals which were domesticated as a food source about 7,000 years ago. They are from the Andes Mountains in South America, not Guinea, but they do squeal like a pig and has the same general body shape. Guinea pigs are related to chinchillas and have no tail and no hair on their ears. They were selectively bred by the Incas from 1200 to 1532 AD and brought to Europe by the Spanish conquerors in the early 1500s.

The AnoGenital distance in guinea pigs is a marker for gender. However, the distances are not as distinguishable as with other rodents. A female has a Y-shaped opening made by the close proximity of the vulva to the anus. Other ways to distinguish the male is by gently pressing the abdomen in order to cause the penis to emerge, male nipples are less developed, and the testicles are evident in a mature male.

A male guinea pig is called a boar. A female is a sow, and young guinea pigs are pups.

Natural Behavior of Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs are rotund social rodents with short legs, small hairless ears, and no tail. Adults weigh about 30 to 35 ounces. In the wild, they live in colonies (clans) of five to 10 with a dominant male in burrows or crevices in rocks. Guinea pigs have special sebaceous glands in their skin on the top of their body and in the anal area which are used to mark their territory and possessions.

They tend to freeze when startled and then scatter frantically. Panicked guinea pigs will stampede and injure smaller, weaker members of a group. A frantic attempt to escape can also lead to injury from falling, if in an elevated cage or on a table. Sexually intact males will challenge each other until dominance is achieved by one. True fighting and injury of an opponent is not common. Head butting is a show of dominance, invitation to play, or irritation with the current situation.

Guinea pigs are vocal. They may whistle, if alarmed or if greeting a known handler who feeds them, chirp if content, and make guttural drilling sounds if agitated by a perceived threat or

from pain. They purr when content and feeling secure. Teeth chattering and hissing are signs of irritation and possible aggression.

They have good peripheral vision typical of prey animals, and very good hearing.

Approaching and Catching

Guinea pigs are easily alarmed and will squeal loudly and attempt to evade capture by a stranger. Some will bite if restrained, but their mouth is too small to inflict severe bites to an adult handler. They have four claws on each of the front feet and three on both rear feet. Their primary means of defense is to either run or freeze in place.

An initial attempt to capture a guinea pig is best done using food as a lure or stroking its head and nose until calm, then grasping it with one hand underneath its chest and cupping the other under its rump. Young, small guinea pigs can be grasped with one hand. Guinea pigs have little loose skin over their neck and shoulders and attempts to scruff them can be painful to them. Another capture method is to use one hand from above to cover its head blocking its vision while covering the rump with the other hand, and then reaching under it from behind. To pick up the guinea pig, the front hand is placed under the guinea pig's chest and the other hand under its rump. When being carried, they will relax if allowed to hide with its body supported by the handler's forearm and its head in the corner of his elbow.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Restraint of adult guinea pigs should always be two-handed. The thorax should be grasped either dorsally or ventrally with one hand as the other hand supports the guinea pig's rump. They should never be scruffed. Their body weight in comparison to their musculoskeletal system strength is too great and back or neck injuries can result.

If there is resistance to restraint, the handler should grasp it without hesitation around the shoulders with one hand. Lift it primarily with the thumb under a leg and under the jaw (to block the animal from lowering its head to bite) and first two fingers around the shoulders without squeezing the thorax and placing the other hand under the body.

A guinea pig's toenails need to be trimmed every eight to 12 weeks. To assist toenail trimming, a handler supports the guinea pig against his chest and holds behind front legs with one hand and the other hand cupped under the rump. This has the guinea pig positioned in a "C" position.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Guinea pigs are friendly little pets that are not from Guinea and are not pigs.**
- 2. Adult guinea pigs should always be picked up using two hands.**
- 3. The toenails of guinea pigs should be trimmed every 2-3 months.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.