

PetSavers

Guinea Pig Guide



Introduction

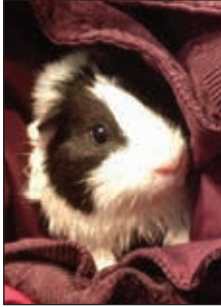
Owning guinea pigs brings its own special rewards and responsibilities and is not a decision that should be undertaken lightly. The Animal Welfare Act has introduced a duty of care, making it the responsibility of the pet owner to ensure that their animals' welfare needs are met. Your guinea pigs will be members of your family for many years so it is worth considering how you will provide for them. It is important that, even where guinea pigs are considered to be the children's pets, an adult oversees their care to ensure that their needs are adequately met.

Guinea pigs, also known as cavies, are small, lively and gentle animals that make great pets for many people. They are easy to handle and rarely bite, are active during the day and are highly sociable, making them suitable pets for adults or for families with children. Guinea pigs are relatively long-lived members of the rodent family, with an average life expectancy of between 4 and 7 years. They use a series of vocalizations to communicate, are intelligent and are very entertaining to watch.

A pet guinea pig should ideally be kept with at least one other pet guinea pig for companionship.



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All animals need:

- A suitable environment (place to live)
- A suitable diet
- To be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- To be housed with or apart from other animals (as applicable)
- To be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

The specific requirements will vary depending on your own circumstances. Factors you should

consider when taking on guinea pigs as pets include:

- Other pets in the household
- The sex and number of guinea pigs you own
- Whether you plan to keep them indoors, outdoors or both
- The local climate.

Many local veterinary practices employ vets and nursing staff that have a particular interest in small mammal pets, like rodents. These professionals are your best allies in keeping your guinea pigs healthy; they have plenty of knowledge and experience and will be happy to offer you advice. It is worthwhile phoning around to locate a vet practice that has experience with guinea pigs and facilities suitable for these important members of your family.

Choosing a guinea pig

Choosing a breed

Guinea pigs were originally domesticated in South America around a thousand years ago, but have since become popular pets in many countries around the world. There are many different breeds of guinea pig, with variations in hair coat type, pattern, markings and colours. Breed standards in the UK are set by the National Cavy Club. Cross-bred guinea pigs are also available. The choice is largely an individual preference, and different breeds of guinea pig have similar care requirements.

Companionship

Guinea pigs are social animals and should not be kept on their own. They need other guinea pigs for companionship. They may be kept in single-sex groups, pairs (a male

and a female) or harems (one male and between 2 and 10 females). Dominance and fighting can be a problem in all-male groups, although is less likely if the guinea pigs have been kept together from a young age and if they are castrated.

Where to get your guinea pigs

Guinea pigs can be bought from many different sources; however, we would recommend that you don't rush into this decision. You want your guinea pigs to be healthy and sociable, so it is worth taking the time to research the source of your guinea pigs to make sure the breeder has done everything they can to give your pets a good start. Unfortunately there are people who breed and sell small mammal pets with little concern for their health and





welfare, and purchasing from these people only perpetuates irresponsible breeding. Reputable breeders should encourage you to visit and see the litter with their mother before making a choice. They should be willing to answer your questions but will also want to satisfy themselves that their guinea pigs will be going to a suitable home. The breeder should provide you with details of any health issues in the parents, the current feeding regime and any treatments that have been given.

Rehoming and rescue centres will often have older guinea pigs available. Detailed information regarding their parentage or previous care arrangements may not be known, but the centre should be able to provide some details of the current feeding and socialization regime and of any health issues they have encountered.

Pet shops may have guinea pigs for sale. It is important to ensure that they have been kept in single-sex groups and that the staff can give you information about the source, age, sex and care of the guinea pigs.

While the internet can provide a convenient way of researching breeds, we would advise

against purchasing guinea pigs without visiting to see them in their home or pet shop environment first. Ideally you want to inspect the mother and littermates. While the offer to deliver your guinea pigs to you may seem appealing, remember that this could be hiding irresponsible breeding and care practices.

Choosing a healthy guinea pig

Choosing a healthy guinea pig starts with finding out about the health of the parents. It is worth checking how closely related the parents are, as this can affect the chance of genetic health problems in the offspring. Ask about any health problems the parents have had and when they last had a veterinary check-up.

While it is not possible to guarantee the health of an individual guinea pig there are several things that you can do to maximize the chance that your own guinea pigs will have the best start in life. Where possible, have the guinea pig checked by a veterinary surgeon either before or immediately after purchase. **Do not choose a sickly looking guinea pig because you feel sorry for it; you will only be taking on problems.**

Choosing a guinea pig

Things to check and find out

- The guinea pig should be alert and active, with a curious disposition.
- The eyes should be bright and without any discharge.
- The ears and nose should be clean and without any discharges.
- The front (incisor) teeth should not be overgrown and should meet neatly to create a cutting surface; there should be no signs of drooling.
- The coat should be well groomed and the skin healthy looking with no evidence of dandruff, patchy hair loss or redness.
- Check that the guinea pig can walk well without any sign of lameness; the skin of the feet should be checked for any sores.
- Check the rear end is clean and free of soiling with urine or faeces.
- Body condition should be not too thin, nor overweight.
- Ask what sex the animal is, and if he/she has received any treatment for illness or parasites.
- Ask whether the guinea pig has been neutered.
- Check that the cage is clean, with fresh food and water available.
- Ask what food has been offered and what method of water provision the guinea pig is familiar with.
- Confirm whether there is a return policy and, if so, note under which conditions and within what timeframe it is valid.

The veterinary surgeon will be able to do a more thorough health check to ensure that the guinea pig is developing normally, that there are not obvious abnormalities such as heart murmurs, dental malocclusions, hernias, etc. and will be able to confirm the sex.

Where a microchip has been inserted you will need to make sure that the guinea pig is correctly registered to you.



It is worth spending some time preparing your home before your guinea pigs arrive. It is also worth thinking about how you will adapt your household routine to accommodate your new pets. Remember you are now responsible for the welfare needs of your guinea pigs.

Before your guinea pigs arrive you will need to make sure that your house and garden are safe and secure. Remember that guinea pigs are small and inquisitive, and may chew items that are poisonous, dangerous or valuable. Your home and garden may seem very strange to your new guinea pigs, and they may need some time to become familiar with their new surroundings.



Housing your guinea pigs

There are a wide range of options for housing pet guinea pigs, including pens, cages, glass tanks and hutches. Depending on your circumstances, the guinea pig may be kept indoors or outdoors, or ideally have access to both options depending on the season.

Enclosure size

A minimum enclosure size of 0.9 m² per adult guinea pig is recommended, with access to a larger run. As guinea pigs do not jump or climb, the cage sides need only be about 40 cm high.

Materials and design

Wire mesh, stainless steel bars or a combination of both tend to work best. Wood may become urine-soaked, and both wood and plastics can be chewed unless supported by wire mesh. If brick or concrete is used, remember these materials provide poor insulation and so deep bedding will be required. Glass tanks are

poorly ventilated and need to be cleaned more regularly than other set-ups to avoid the build-up of ammonia and associated respiratory problems.

Avoid wire flooring as this can cause foot and leg problems. Smooth surfaces are preferred as they are easy to clean and disinfect and do not pose a risk of injury to the animal inhabitants.

Make sure that the enclosure is escape-proof, well insulated and draught-free, with ample protection from rain and direct sunlight. Protection from predators (including foxes, birds of prey and pet dogs, cats and ferrets) is important. To avoid disease, the enclosure should be constructed to exclude wild rodents or birds gaining access to the guinea pig's environment.

The environment

Guinea pigs are very sensitive to temperature extremes. Ideal environmental conditions are a temperature range of 16–24°C, with a relative humidity

Preparing for your new guinea pig

of 30–70%. **Heat stress occurs at temperatures above 27°C and in severe cases can be fatal.** Guinea pigs may tolerate lower temperatures if adequate bedding and shelter are supplied and there is an acclimatization period.

Hutches and cages may be raised off the ground to avoid damp and draughts.

In temperate climates consider housing indoors, such as in the house or a garage or shed, during the winter months, but be careful to avoid areas that are noisy as guinea pigs have sensitive hearing. Also, avoid areas that pose a risk from fumes, such as from smoking, fires or cars. Ensure that lights are turned off at night, so that 'day length' remains at 10–12 hours.

Flooring and bedding

Flooring should be smooth and covered to a depth of 2–5 cm by wood shavings, cellulose fibre, pelleted recycled paper,

newspaper, peat or corncob granules. The substrate needs to be changed frequently to keep the environment dry, to reduce the build-up of ammonia and to clear the area of faeces (guinea pigs produce a lot of faeces and they may urinate or defecate in food/water bowls).

Additional dust-free bedding material should be provided, such as hay, straw or shredded paper.

Exercise and environmental enrichment

Providing a space large enough to allow for daily exercise is important to avoid problems such as obesity and osteoporosis. There are significant health benefits to allowing guinea pigs access to graze on grass and access to sunlight on a regular basis (for guinea pigs housed predominantly indoors, this can be achieved by the use of a mobile run or ark).





Guinea pigs can be allowed to run free indoors but only when strictly supervised. Make sure all doors are closed, that there are no escape holes and that cats, dogs and ferrets are kept out of the room.

Within the enclosure there should be an enclosed solid-sided nesting area or shelter for security (this can be as simple as an upside-down cardboard box). This acts as a quiet place to retreat to and sleep. If



you have children, teach them to respect the guinea pigs' bed/hide as a place where their pets can rest undisturbed.

Guinea pigs are not usually interested in expensive toys but many enjoy exploring cardboard boxes, hay nests and running through tubes or pipes. Wooden blocks or branches of fruit trees, willow or poplar can be provided for chewing. You could also try hiding small amounts of food around the cage to help keep your guinea pigs alert and active. It is important that any toys, items for chewing or enrichment devices are safe. **For example, avoid access to poisonous plants such as cherry, plum, cedar or oleander.** If toys become worn or damaged, they should be replaced.

Guinea pigs should not be housed with rabbits. Rabbits can bully them, transmit disease to them and the two species have different nutritional requirements.

Feeding your guinea pigs

Ensuring a healthy diet is vital to the health of pet guinea pigs. Guinea pigs are naturally grazing animals and are entirely vegetarian. Their diet must be high in fibre to avoid dental and digestive illnesses. It is also essential to provide them with vitamin C as, like people, they lack the enzyme to produce this important vitamin. Vitamin C deficiency, also known as scurvy, can lead to a host of health problems.

Guinea pigs can be fussy eaters and rapid changes in diet or introduction

of new foods can result in gut upsets or refusal to eat. They develop dietary preferences early in life and do not adapt readily to changes in type, presentation or appearance of their food or water, so it is important to establish good feeding practices from the outset.

Heavy ceramic dishes or stainless steel bowls that clip on to the front of a hutch work well as food containers, as they are hard to tip over. They need to be cleaned regularly and the food refreshed daily.

Grass and hay

Grass and/or hay is the most important dietary item and should be available at all times to all guinea pigs. The high fibre provided by these items is essential to wear down the teeth that are constantly growing and to ensure that the intestinal tract remains healthy. Quality, bagged, dust-free meadow, oaten or timothy hay is suitable for guinea pigs without all-day access to fresh pasture.



Lucerne hay has higher levels of calcium and protein and is only suitable for growing young guinea pigs (up to 2 to 3 months of age) or pregnant sows.

Fruit and vegetables

One cup or handful of green vegetables, such as spinach, broccoli, kale or cabbage, should be given each day. Dandelions, groundsel, Asian greens, tomato, asparagus, peppers, chicory and parsley are also good choices. Fresh food should be washed and prepared as it is for people.

Small pieces of fruit (e.g. melon or orange) can be given occasionally as treats. Sugary or starchy treats and snacks should not be given to guinea pigs as they can lead to serious intestinal upsets and dental problems.

Commercial pellets

Good-quality commercial guinea pig pellets are used to supplement the hay/grass and vegetable-based diet. Look for pellets with stabilized vitamin C and a high fibre content

(at least 10%). For growing or pregnant guinea pigs these pellets can be offered freely. As a rough guide, about 20 grams or 2 tablespoons per day per guinea pig is appropriate for non-breeding adults. Guinea pigs can become obese if they are fed too much, especially if they don't get a lot of exercise.

Pellets are preferred to muesli-type dry mixes as the latter are usually lower in fibre and permit the guinea pig to feed selectively (i.e. pick out only the preferred items), which can result in poor nutrient intake. Do not feed rabbit foods or mixes with seeds and grains in them to guinea pigs.

Pellets should be stored where they cannot become contaminated and should not be used after the expiration date, as the vitamin C level is likely to be too low.



Starting out

Your guinea pigs should be fully weaned at purchase (about 6 weeks old). Always ask the breeder/pet shop/rescue centre what they have been feeding them on. Wait until your guinea pigs have settled in before making changes to the diet, in order to reduce the risk of stomach upsets. After a few days you can introduce a new food type, by gradually mixing an increasing proportion of it into the guinea pigs' previous food over about a week.

Note that it is normal for guinea pigs to eat some of their own droppings; it helps keep the bacterial balance in their digestive tract healthy.

Water and supplements

Fresh, clean drinking water must be available to your guinea pigs at all times. To avoid water spills and faecal soiling of

water dishes, many owners provide water in sipper gravity bottles. This water must be replaced daily, as guinea pigs may spit back into the tube; it is also important to check on a daily basis that the mechanism is working.

An additional source of vitamin C should be provided. Options include a hay-based chewable tablet given every day or a dissolvable tablet placed into the drinking water at a rate of 250-500mg/litre, which needs to be replaced daily. Supplements may be available from your local veterinary practice (eg. Oxbow Animal Health Natural Science Vitamin C) or a pharmacy. If your guinea pig is not used to vitamin C supplemented water it is important to ensure they are drinking what is offered; if the supplement reduces their water intake, switch to a chewable tablet.



Normal behaviour

Socialization

After bringing your guinea pigs home it is useful to introduce them slowly to various sights, sounds, people and experiences around the house and garden. Remember that guinea pigs are naturally prey animals and, as such, can have a nervous temperament. It is important not to overwhelm them with too many potentially frightening experiences at once.

Once they have become accustomed to their surroundings, it is helpful to handle them regularly so they are less anxious about being picked up in the future.

Always use both hands to pick up a guinea pig. Place one hand across the shoulders, with your thumb tucked behind the shoulder and fingers wrapped around the ribs. Hold firmly but do not squeeze. Put your other hand underneath the hindquarters for support. It is best to hold the guinea pig close to your body or to sit down and put them on your lap so they feel secure.



Communication

Guinea pigs use various noises to communicate with each other. You will soon get to learn the different sounds your guinea pigs make when they are excited, frightened, content, etc.

Group dynamics

Guinea pig groups will establish a social hierarchy, usually dominated by a male if there is one in the group or pair. Introduction of another male may destabilize the group dynamics. Fighting is usually limited to intense vocalizations, nipping, and prevention of lower-ranking individuals from reaching food or water. The dominant animal may barber (chew the hair) of others. Barbering can also occur due to boredom or overcrowding. Adults may chew the ears of younger guinea pigs.



Prevention of pain, suffering, injury and disease

Disease prevention

Good husbandry (good enclosure design and hygiene, and appropriate diet) is the most important tool for prevention of disease in guinea pigs.

Guinea pigs require regular veterinary check-ups, at least annually. At this time your guinea pig will receive a thorough examination, allowing the vet to pick up on any health issues in the earliest stages. Guinea pigs do not require vaccination or regular worming.



Signs of illness

Observe your guinea pig regularly. If you notice any of the following this might indicate a health problem and you should contact your ~~local~~ vet to arrange a consultation:

- Lethargy
- Diarrhoea or a significant change in the size/number of droppings
- Weak hind limbs, swollen joints or lameness
- Hair loss, flaky or crusting skin or excessive scratching
- Not eating or drinking
- Dull eye colour or coat
- Squealing when urinating or blood in the urine
- Dirty, uneven or broken teeth
- Drooling or tooth-grinding
- Discharges from the eyes or nose
- Breathing difficulties
- Lumps
- Swelling of the abdomen
- Wounds or sores on the feet

Neutering

Neutering (sterilizing) your guinea pigs can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- To prevent unwanted pregnancies
- To decrease aggression/fighting (especially in males)
- To prevent or treat ovarian cysts – a common reproductive disease in females.

Males are known as boars and females are referred to as sows. Female guinea pigs reach sexual maturity at 4 to 5 weeks of age and males at 8 to 9 weeks.

It is important to verify the sex of your new guinea pigs and to ensure that they have not been housed in a potential breeding situation. If you are planning to house a male and female together, you should consider having the male neutered. Note that it may take around a month for a male to become sterile after castration, so you may need to house them separately for a few weeks following the procedure.

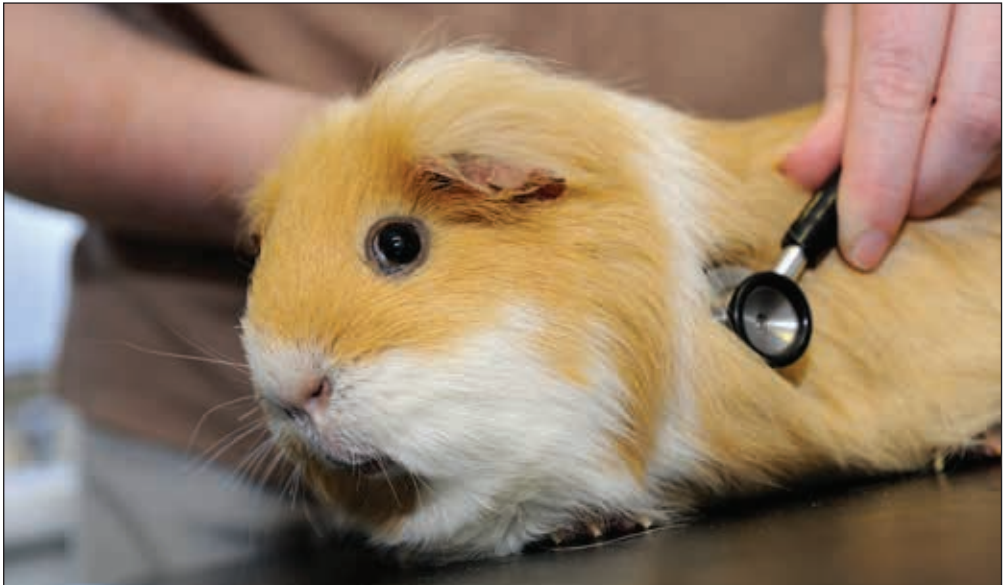
The decision to neuter an individual animal for medical or behavioural reasons needs to take into account factors such as gender, age and social grouping, as well as current and future health status.

Veterinary advice should always be sought regarding the risks and benefits in individual cases.

There are a number of options regarding timing and methods of neutering and these should be discussed with your vet before making decisions for an individual animal.

The neutering procedure for male guinea pigs is castration, which involves removing the testicles that produce the sperm. The operation is performed under a general anaesthetic.

The neutering procedure for female guinea pigs is spaying, which involves removal of the ovaries and usually the uterus (womb). The operation is performed under general anaesthesia. Spaying is a longer operation than castration and the recovery time is usually longer.



Breeding

For breeding sows the timing of their first litter is important. It is recommended that sows are not bred for the first time until they reach an adequate body size and level of maturity (usually 3 to 4 months of age). However, it is also important that they have their first litter before the age of about 7 months. This is because when a young sow gives birth for the first time, the two halves of her pelvis move apart to allow passage of the 'pups'. This widened birth canal will then remain open for the rest of her life, allowing future litters to be born naturally. In contrast, the pelvic bones of a sow that has not bred will fuse together before she is 12 months of age, producing an inflexible canal that may be too narrow for the passage of newborns via normal labour if she becomes pregnant later in life. For this

reason, females that have not bred before the age of 6 to 8 months have a high risk of birthing complications, often requiring caesarean surgery.

The female is pregnant for 63 to 72 days and the average litter size is two to four babies. Guinea pigs are prolific breeders, and females can get pregnant again immediately after giving birth. The most obvious sign of pregnancy is a distended abdomen, but this can also be seen with some medical conditions. If pregnancy is suspected, it can be confirmed by your vet.

Guinea pigs are born fully furred, with their eyes open, and can walk within minutes of birth. They require their mother's milk for at least 3 weeks but they will often also eat solid foods during this time.



Grooming

Establish a regular grooming routine as soon as you bring your guinea pigs home. Make grooming sessions short at first, until they are used to the process.

The amount of time you will need to spend on grooming depends on the type of coat. Daily grooming is recommended for long-haired breeds.

Not only will it give you the opportunity to remove dead hairs from the coat and reduce matting, but grooming also provides the perfect opportunity to check your guinea pig for any abnormalities such as a soiled hind end. Grooming sessions also give you the chance to check for mites and to examine the guinea pig's coat, feet and nails, eyes, ears and incisor teeth for anything that might require a trip to the vet.



Dental care

Guinea pigs have incisor teeth at the front of the mouth and a set of cheek teeth at the back of the mouth. All their teeth grow continuously throughout life. It is useful to check the incisors regularly at home, but it isn't possible to see the cheek teeth without specialized equipment because of the unique anatomy of the mouth. A visit to the vet is necessary for a thorough dental check and should be arranged at least once a year.

Pet insurance

You may want to consider taking out pet insurance so that you won't need to worry about vets' bills if a guinea pig has an accident or becomes ill. Although routine procedures such as health checks and neutering are not covered by insurance, insurance can provide peace of mind by covering unexpected veterinary fees. Ensure that you check policy details and exclusion clauses before buying an insurance policy, to check it is right for your situation. Remember that conditions that existed before taking out the policy will not be covered.

Old age and preparing for death

As with all animals, serious health issues can occur in older guinea pigs (over 6 years of age). It is important to discuss any changes you have noticed in your older guinea pig's behaviour or health with your vet. They will be able to determine whether there is a problem, investigate it if needed and provide advice on appropriate methods of treatment or, in the case of incurable problems, relieve the pet's symptoms including pain or anxiety.

Serious health issues should be discussed openly with each member of the family; parents will vary in the way they wish to explain the situation to their children but it is important to acknowledge the feelings of everyone involved.

If a pet dies suddenly without notice, it is normal to feel shock or anger, denial or guilt. Causes of death can be investigated or at least discussed with your vet to help explain what happened.



With advances in veterinary science, some conditions can be successfully managed for prolonged periods, but there does come a time when the animal's life comes to an end naturally or the quality of life of the guinea pig reaches a stage at which euthanasia may be considered the most humane option to relieve pain or advanced disease. Your vet can help provide guidance on when it might be appropriate to say goodbye.

This can be a difficult time for all the family. The bond between owner and pet can be just as strong with guinea pigs as it is with any other animal, and it is important to remember that it is normal to feel intense sadness at the loss of beloved pet.

For planned euthanasia, there are various options you may feel comfortable discussing with your vet beforehand, including whether you or other family members wish to be present. The process should be explained to you by the vet. This decision is never taken lightly and all staff at the practice will be sensitive to your emotions. Grief can be different for adults compared to children. Parents and friends can comfort the grieving child with empathy, love and understanding. Allowing children to talk about their pet is often a good way to help with the process.

If one of a pair of guinea pigs succumbs to illness or old age, consideration should be given to acquiring a companion for the remaining animal. Your vet can provide guidance depending on the situation.

Pet loss support counselling is available for those who need additional support to cope with the difficult loss of a pet.

Michelle Campbell-Ward

**BSc BVSc (Hons I) DZooMed(Mammalian)
MANZCVS(Zoo Medicine) MRCVS**



Michelle is a former PetSavers Resident in Rabbit and Exotic Medicine and is an RCVS Recognised Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine. She currently works as a clinical veterinarian at the Taronga Western Plains Zoo Wildlife Hospital in Australia and is an exotic animal consultant for the Veterinary Information Network. Michelle has 14 years experience as a veterinarian working with a great variety of species including guinea pigs. She has lectured widely and is a contributing author to a number of journal articles and textbooks including the *BSAVA Manual of Rodents and Ferrets* and is section editor of *Clinical Endocrinology of Companion Animals*. Michelle is dedicated to improving the standards of animal welfare and veterinary care for all species.

Other sources of information/links

- PetSavers: www.petsavers.org.uk
- BSAVA: www.bsava.com
- RCVS – Findavet: findavet.rcvs.org.uk/home
- AEMV – Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians: www.aemv.org/vetlist.cfm
- RSPCA – Guinea pig welfare: www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rodents/guineapigs
- Blue Cross – Looking after your guinea pig: www.bluecross.org.uk/2152/looking-after-your-guinea-pig

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PetSavers is dedicated to improving the health of the nation's pets. We do this by funding clinical research projects and Master's degrees by research.

Clinical research projects give us a better understanding of pets' illnesses. This leads to improved diagnosis and treatment so that pets can have longer and healthier lives.

A Master's degree by research develops the skills of vets so they can apply the results of the research and their expertise to pets as soon as possible.

No experimental animals are used in PetSavers studies.

In the past 40 years PetSavers has given over £2 million towards these goals. Over this time the need for this funding has become even greater as other sources have dried up. We rely on the support of vets, nurses and pet owners.

By helping PetSavers, you can make sure that our knowledge of small animal medicine and surgery is improved. Please help us to continue funding these important research projects.

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- Become a PetSaver by making a regular donation
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- Donate online
- Nominate PetSavers as a beneficiary in your Will
- Organize your own fundraising event
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Registered office: Woodrow House, 1 Telford Way,
Waterwells Business Park, Quedgeley, Gloucester GL2 2AB

Tel: 01452 726723 Email: info@petsavers.org.uk

Website: www.petsavers.org.uk