

JERSEY CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE WELFARE OF GUINEA PIGS INCLUDING THOSE KEPT FOR BREEDING

THE CODE

The Code of recommendations for the welfare of guinea pigs including those kept for breeding is intended to encourage those responsible for looking after these animals to adopt the highest standards of husbandry. It takes account of five basic needs, known as the "Five Freedoms".

The Five Freedoms are:

1. FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST

- by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour;

2. FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT

- by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area;

3. FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE

- by prevention or by rapid diagnosis and treatment;

4. FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR

- by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animals' own kind;

5. FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS

- by ensuring conditions and treatment to avoid mental suffering.

HOUSING

1. The environment should provide freedom of movement, food and water and the care which is appropriate to their health and well being.

2. The animals must be able to stand up on their hind legs without their heads touching the roof, lie down and turn around.

3. Size, shape and fittings of pens, hutches and cages should be designed, as far as practicable, to meet the physiological and behavioural needs of the animals.

4. Housing pens must be kept dry and raised off the ground, free of dramatic temperature fluctuations and be adequately ventilated, but protected from draughts.

5. Cages, hutches or pens should be made of material that will not harm the animals, is durable and will withstand normal cleaning. They should be designed to minimise risk of injury with comfortable floors that permit easy removal of droppings.

6. Guinea pigs are best kept in hutches, with either large secure runs connected to them or separate secure pens for exercise. The hutch should have an enclosed solid-sided nesting area for shelter, and a mesh fronted section. The flooring of the hutch should be smooth.

7. The recommended minimum size for a hutch is 0.9m² of floor space per adult guinea pig. A sow with a litter should be given a minimum of 1500cm² floor space.

8. Guinea pigs are social animals and, therefore, should be kept in groups of compatible individuals or in breeding pairs. Remember, a mixed pair will breed. Male guinea pigs may fight, but aggression between the opposite sexes or amongst a group of females is uncommon. To prevent fighting, males kept in groups should have been raised together since weaning. Also, a father and a son may be kept together without fighting. Care should be taken to monitor and prevent aggression and to separate individuals if necessary.

9. It is best not to keep guinea pigs with rabbits, as cross infection can occur. Also, there may be bullying by either species, but especially by the rabbit, as rabbits are naturally dominant. To minimise the stress levels of guinea pigs, they should not be exposed to other rodents, rabbits, dogs or cats.

10. Environmental enrichment, appropriate to the animal's needs, will allow animals to carry out a range of normal behaviours. Restricted environments can lead to behavioural and physiological abnormalities.

11. A secure, private place for raising young, such as a nest or secluded, sheltered den area, should be provided. Nesting or bedding material also allows the animal to partially control its own immediate environment (for example, noise, temperature and humidity).

12. Suitable clean, comfortable bedding material must be provided for breeding animals to a depth of 2-5cm. Bedding materials should provide insulation but cause no hazard to the young or adult animals.

13. Good quality hay can be used for bedding. In addition to the nutritional value to the animal, it provides a form of environmental enrichment, as guinea pigs enjoy burrowing in large quantities of loose hay. Good quality straw may also be used for bedding.

14. All hutches and cages, as well as the food and water, must be protected from contamination by wild rodents and insects.

Temperature

15. The optimal temperature range for housing breeding guinea pigs is 16-24°C. Temperatures should be maintained in both winter and summer. In the very cold winter months, guinea pigs should be brought indoors

16. Temperature should be controlled to prevent undue fluctuations which may cause unnecessary stress or welfare problems to the animals.

17. If good temperature control is not maintained, the breeding performance of guinea pigs will be impaired. Pups are at risk of fatal chilling at temperatures less than 17°C. Low temperatures, as well as high humidity, will also promote respiratory disease.

Lighting

18. During daylight hours, light may be provided to exercise and sleeping areas so that all parts are clearly visible. A proportion of this light should be natural light. Adequate light must always be available to inspect the guinea pigs.

19. Guinea pigs housed indoors should be provided with a minimum of 10-12 hours light per day.

20. Care should be taken to ensure that animals are not placed in direct sunlight.

Ventilation

21. Premises and accommodation must be well ventilated to maintain suitable air quality.

Noise

22. Guinea pigs are easily startled and may injure themselves if they panic. Care should be taken to avoid sudden loud noises near the animals.

MANAGEMENT

Feed

23. The diet should satisfy the nutritional requirement of the animals.

24. Vitamin C - Guinea pigs are one of the few creatures - like humans - who cannot make their own vitamin C, so it is vital that they have adequate vitamin C in their diet to prevent illness. Do not give them rabbit food as it does not have adequate vitamin C.

25. Guinea pigs have chisel-like incisor teeth which grow continually and are kept to a uniform length by lots and lots of gnawing each day. It is important your guinea pig's daily diet includes hay and fresh vegetables. To give your guinea pig an interesting, appealing diet, give a mix of pellets and vegetables and always provide good quality hay.

26. Guinea pigs need feeding twice a day and all food bowls and utensils should be cleaned daily.

Water

27. Clean fresh drinking water must be available to all animals at all times.

28. Water can be provided in water bottles or other suitable containers (such as ceramic bowls) that will not easily tip over and spill.

29. All water containers should be cleaned and refilled daily with fresh water.

Handling

30. Time should be allocated for the grooming, if appropriate, and handling of the animals.

31. Guinea pigs can be quite nervous and are easily stressed, so care should be taken when handling them. They will become accustomed to regular, gentle handling and be less nervous

Hygiene

32. Premises, accommodation and equipment must be cleaned frequently

ANIMAL HEALTH

33. In addition to being given suitable food, drink and bedding material, guinea pigs should be checked on at suitable intervals throughout the day. Guinea pigs may be kept as pets or as part of a business. Whatever the circumstances, it is important for the person looking after the animals to be able to recognise signs of ill health or abnormality.

34. Mating of females should be delayed until the animals are 12-14 weeks old, when they reach a body weight of 400-600gs.
35. Virgin females should be mated before 6-8 months of age. In the last weeks of pregnancy there are changes in preparation for giving birth. These include gradual relaxation of ligaments and separation of the pelvic symphysis. If the breeding of a female has been delayed such that she is over 9-12 months of age, separation may not occur and the sow may not be able to give birth normally.
36. Females older than 8 months of age which have never bred should never be housed with an intact boar.
37. Boars should not be bred until they weigh 650g at approximately 10-16 weeks of age.
38. While guinea pigs may remain fertile for up to four years, the optimal breeding life of the guinea pig ends at 2 years of age. Generally, litter sizes decrease and reproductive complications begin to increase after 18-28 months of age.
39. Commercially, guinea pigs are generally bred as breeding pairs or in harems.
40. Young animals must be maintained in groups of similar size.
41. Pregnant females should be separated from other animals late in pregnancy and housed together with their young until weaning.
42. In harem mating systems, large pups will suckle sows which have just given birth and deprive their young of milk. Consequently, weanlings should be promptly removed from intact breeding groups, or sows with nursing pups should be isolated in a nursery cage.
43. Exercise is important for pregnant sows to prevent pregnancy toxaemia and to maintain body condition. Exercise can be encouraged by keeping the sow in a spacious pen. However, towards the end of pregnancy when the female may be double her normal body weight, food and water should be kept in close proximity to the sow.
44. Pups should be weaned at 150-240g body weight or 15-28 days of age. It is important that female offspring be weaned by 21 days of age and isolated from boars, because they may come into season by 4-5 weeks of age and may breed.

Safety

45. Accommodation must be secure to ensure the safety of the animals.

Disease

46. All reasonable precautions should be taken to prevent and control the spread of infectious or contagious diseases amongst guinea pigs.
47. Advice from a veterinary surgeon must be sought where a guinea pig shows signs of parasites, disease, injury or illness. A competent person must then ensure that this veterinary advice is followed.
48. Facilities for isolation should be available when required. An adequate area to prevent the spread of infectious disease between the isolation case and any other guinea pigs must be provided. Hygiene precautions, such as hand washing, must be taken after leaving the isolation facilities and before handling other guinea pigs.

RECORDS

The information kept should be managed in accordance with the Data Protection (Jersey) Law 2018:

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49. Effective and accurate breeding, health and disease recording systems should be maintained.

50. Accurate records should be kept for each breeding guinea pig providing the identification of the sow, date of birth, address where she is kept, breed, date of mating and details of sire. Licensed guinea pig breeders must also keep a record of litters, including the sex of the pups, date of birth, weight, description and total number in the litter. The record must also show the details of sale and name and address of purchaser.

51. It is recommended that all guinea pigs are microchipped by a veterinary surgeon.

STAFF TRAINING

52. When staff are employed, a written training policy should be provided. Staff training records should be kept.

EMERGENCIES / FIRE PREVENTION

53. Appropriate steps must be taken for the protection of the guinea pigs in case of fire or other emergencies.

TRANSPORT

54. All vehicles must be secure and should not be left unattended when transporting guinea pigs. Vehicles use for transportation should have adequate ventilation.

55. All appropriate steps should be taken to ensure that the guinea pigs are provided with suitable food, drink and bedding material when being transported. This is especially important if confinement is to be prolonged. Time in transit should be kept to a minimum.

56. Animals that are incompatible should not be transported together.

57. The number of animals within any one container must be such that animals travel in comfort with due regard to likely conditions throughout the journey.

58. Animals that are to be transported should be in good health. Sick or injured animals should only be transported for purpose of treatment or diagnosis.

LEGISLATION

59. The following legislation is of relevance:

- Animal Welfare (Jersey) Law 2004
- Animal Health (Jersey) Law 2016
- Veterinary Surgeons (Jersey) Law 1999

18-01 AWC (05/04/07) (legislation amended 19/10/17)