

Guinea pig behavior and introducing new companions

Guinea pigs are naturally social species and in the wild they will live in large groups called 'herds'. Guinea pigs should therefore never be housed alone. Rabbits are not suitable companions as bullying often occurs and they also carry certain infections which may cause a problem in your pig. Combinations that work best are same sex pairs, or one neutered male to up to 10 females for a group.

Common reasons for fighting/bullying:

There are a number of reasons why two or more guinea pigs do not get on, including the following:

- **Lack of space** – this is a common problem with guinea pigs. Most pet shop bought cages and hutches are far too small to fit a pair of guinea pigs in - let alone more. The minimum requirements for two guinea pigs set by the RSPCA are 120cm by 60cm. However, the more space the better. The more cramped the space the more likely you will have fights break out.
- **Age** – When guinea pigs are around 9-12 months they often go through their own 'teenage' period. At this time, they may squabble with cage mates.
- **Too many boars** – If you house more than two boys together then you carry a huge risk of them fighting for the hierarchy in the group. They will often get on well in pairs but trios rarely work. Female trios tend to not have as many problems
- Similarly, a neutered male and female will get on very well together, however; adding two boys in with female(s) is asking for trouble, this will often end in very severe fighting
- **Females in the room** - housing a bonded pair of males together in a room near females can spark fighting.

What should you do?

There are several steps you can take to re-bond or encourage your guinea pigs to get along better. Here are a few things to consider:

- Make their cage/hutch bigger
- Put two of everything in the cage (water bottles, bowls, hides), to reduce competition
- Remove any females from nearby bonded males



- Only one neutered male per group of females
- No more than two males together
- Bathing them in the same shampoo before placing them back together in a clean cage

How to introduce a new companion

Bonding new guinea pigs together or adding more to an existing group can be nerve racking even for the experienced owner. The trick is to be patient. Providing there is no outright fighting or blood drawn then it's best to let the guinea pigs sort out the hierarchy. Here are a few steps to take for introducing a new companion.

- 1.) Allow the new companion to be housed in a cage next to the other for a week or so. It is best if they can sniff and interact through cage bars first before proper introductions
- 2.) Have supervised meetings on neutral ground – not in their existing cages/hutches. For example, a separate clean cage, a bathroom or kitchen floor or a run outside on the grass, ensure they have plenty of free roaming space.
- 3.) Give the guinea pigs plenty to do during the bonding period, scattering food around and giving them tunnels to run through keeps them occupied. Never place igloos/hides which have only one entrance, this risks one guinea pig being trapped inside by another.
- 4.) Watch for signs of aggression/dominance (see list below). If need be, have a towel to hand in case fighting escalates
- 5.) If they are showing good signs of bonding, then place them together into their cage. If this is to be where one is currently living, ensure the cage/hutch is cleaned down thoroughly to remove as much of that guinea pig's scent as possible
- 6.) Give them two of everything, including water bottles, bowls, hides and even hay racks if need be, this stops squabbling at dinner times
- 7.) Do not separate unless aggression escalates, it can take weeks for guinea pigs to establish hierarchy, and in that time there may be chasing, nipping and squeaking.

Ladder of dominance/aggression:

Even bonded pairs and groups will display much of this behavior when living together; it is natural for them to test the boundaries from time to time. It only becomes a problem if one is becoming constantly bullied or stopped from eating, blood is drawn or serious fights break out.

Mild dominance	Head/nose raising, head-butting, mild nipping,
Moderate dominance	Teeth chattering, chasing, nipping hard (usually causes the recipient to squeak), rumble strutting (where they purr and rock side to side from one back foot to the other), mounting, urine spraying,
Major dominance	Teeth baring (looks like yawning), lunging at one another, aggressive fighting, major biting (drawing blood).

