

HAND REARING ORPHANED GUINEA PIGS

Normal guinea pig birth

A female guinea pig is called a sow and her babies are called pups, litter sizes are usually an average of 3, but vary from 1-8 or more (larger litters are often subject to stillborn pups). A guinea pig's gestation period is an average of 63 days long up to 72 days. When the guinea pig is ready to give birth, she does not build a nest, but will squat in a position similar to when she toilets, this often happens in the late evening or during the early hours of the morning. Birthing is usually quite quick, taking around 5 minutes to deliver the first pup, and 3-4 minutes between each subsequent pup.

Once a pup is born, the sow will groom and lick the pup and ingest the foetal membranes. Once all the pups have been born, the placenta will follow soon after; sows need to ingest this to help kick start their milk production.

Guinea pigs are precocial, this means they are born fully formed with hair, their eyes and ears open and able to eat solid food from the day they are born. Healthy weights for pups should be around 70-100g depending on the size of the litter. The larger the litter the smaller the birth size – and can be as small as 40g in some cases. Smaller pups are often at a higher risk of problems. Ensure that you weigh the pups daily after they are born.

Please note that any males should be removed prior to the birth of the pups – they do not cause harm to the young but they can mate the sow within hours of birth of the young, this is dangerous and not advised for the sow.



When is hand rearing necessary?

Most sows rear their pups well but there are a few times where the babies may need hand-rearing, these include times when the mother is unwell or has passed away. Occasionally a young sow will reject the pups and you may notice that she does not pay them any attention and they are not feeding. Pups are very independent from day one but still require some feeding from their mother. Try bonding the mother and pups in a very small confined space if this is the case – sometimes it can be successful.

If the pups are orphaned or rejected then they can be tried with another lactating sow if one is available.

Housing

Keep the young in an escape proof, warm, dry, clean enclosure with hides and hay to hide in as well. Temperatures of 22 – 25 degrees should be maintained ideally. An adult guinea pig should be housed with the young to teach them how to behave and what to eat – this is very important as without an adult they will not learn how to pick up and eat food or drink from a bottle. Ideal adults are placid older males or a sow who has previously nursed pups. Monitoring their interactions is important.

Feeding

Guinea pig milk is high in fat, protein and lactose and the young also need vitamin C. Cow's milk is not a suitable substitute. Wombaroo guinea pig hand-rearing formula is a guinea pig milk replacer that is high in vitamin C however this is made in Australia and must be shipped internationally so it is often not practical. Kitten milk formulas such as Cimicat are an appropriate alternative which also contains vitamin C. These formulas are in powdered form and should be made up following the instructions on the packet. If you are struggling with milk formulations then critical care formulas for herbivores are acceptable on their own or mixed with milk formula.

Milk should be made up fresh at each feed and will need to be fed to the pups at 35°C using a small teat bottle. Do not feed directly from a syringe unless you are used to syringe feeding as this risks fatal aspiration pneumonia. Always feed from an appropriate bottle where possible although some will accept milk from a spoon if necessary.

Strict hygiene is essential to avoid infections and equipment needs to be thoroughly washed and products used to sterilise baby bottles (eg. Milton) should be used between each feed.

Initially the young may need patience and gentle encouragement to feed until they get the hang of it. Gently holding the baby in a normal position, drip a small drop of milk onto the lips and allow them to lick it off. Patiently repeat this process until the guinea pig gets the hang of suckling. Never position the pup up-side-down for feeding.



Feeding quantities vary, but on average guinea pigs need feeding every 2 - 3 hours for the first 5 days then every 4 hours after this until weaning. It is important to monitor the pups weights, it is common for pups to lose a few grams in weight in the first couple of days after birth but they should then gain between 3 and 7 grams a day. (More so as they get older)

Weight (g)	Feed (mL/day)	Weight (g)	Feed (mL/day)	Weight (g)	Feed (mL/day)
20	9	70	22	120	33
30	12	80	24	130	35
40	14	90	27	140	37
50	17	100	29	150	39
60	20	110	31	160	41

Urination & defecation

Most pups need stimulation from the sow in order to urinate and defecate. You can recreate this by using a warm moist ball of cotton wool and gently rubbing the urogenital area. This may take 15-20 secs or more before urine and faeces are passed. Fecal pellets may not be seen for the first 48 hours initially as their guts need to load with food.

Weaning

Pups are usually weaned at 21 days (3 weeks) but milk supplementation can continue up to 4 weeks. Hay, guinea pig pellets and very small amounts of vegetables can be offered from birth. Young guinea pigs will watch adults eating to learn what is safe. Fresh grass, vegetables and greens provide vitamin C. Offer plenty of alfalfa hay to young as this is rich in nutrients and calcium which they need for growth. Be careful not to feed too much of this to a fostering (non-lactating) adult as the high calcium content can cause excess calcium in the bladder.

Handling

Pups both orphan or otherwise can be gently handled from birth. The mother will not reject them if they smell of humans. Ensure you always wash your hands before and after handling the pups to both remove harmful bacteria and to remove scents of objects or other animals that might stress them. Handle the pups regularly to help socialise them.



Separate the different sexes

You must separate male and female pups at weaning age as they are capable of reaching sexual maturity from 3-4 weeks of age. Place them into same sex groups with a same sex adult guinea pig if possible. If you are unsure of the sex of your pups please contact us for a health check appointment.

Common problems

Failure to thrive - If any of the guinea pigs become listless or fail to gain weight seek veterinary advice.

Chest infection/pneumonia - This occurs commonly when people force too much milk in during feeding causing it to enter an airway (aspiration). Never squeeze the sides of the feeding bottle or rapidly depress the syringe plunger – be patient.

Monitor for inactivity, nasal discharge, poor growth and difficulty breathing/rapid breathing. Please book an appointment with reception if you notice any of these signs.

