

Non-Government Schools Animal Ethics Committee - STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

SOP No:	03	
SOP	Guinea Pigs	
Scientific Name:	<i>Cavia porcellus</i>	
Category:	2 only	
Approved activities:	Activity	Category
	a. Breeding of guinea pigs in the classroom	2
	b. The appropriate care of classroom pet guinea pigs	2
Approval Level:	c. Capture, restraint, and handling of guinea pigs	2
	d. Measurement of body weight, body condition, growth, and body proportions (non-invasive)	2
	e. Administration of oral and topical treatments to guinea pigs	2
	f. Coat care and grooming	2
Authority:	<p>Where an activity is not listed in this SOP, approval must be sought from the Animal Ethics Committee and confirmed before it can be undertaken.</p> <p>Government Schools – Department for Education and Childhood Development Animal Ethics Committee</p> <p>Independent and Catholic Schools – Non-Government Schools Animal Ethics Committee (NGSAEC)</p>	
Authority Approval Date:	1 August 2010	
Last Update:	3 July 2023	
Disclaimer:	<p><i>This document may be updated at any time. You should check the web site regularly to ensure that you are meeting the most recent recommendations. If you note any concerns with the information provided (inadequate, incorrect) please contact the relevant AEC.</i></p>	
Licensing Requirement:	Not applicable	
Compliance Requirement:	<p>The keeping of this species requires approval from the School Principal. It is recommended that this Standard Operating Procedure be followed as a minimum in the provision of appropriate care and housing for this species.</p>	

General Information:

Guinea pigs are rodents of South American origin, sometimes referred to as Cavies and are strictly vegetarian. They occur in family groups, sometimes in large colonies, with burrow systems. They are highly vocal emitting a range of purrs, squeals, squeaks, and grunts. Guinea pig breeds are grouped by hair type and colouration. They are divided into short-haired, long-haired, rough coated, hairless, and then various colourations.

All three haired varieties come as single colours, bi (2) or tri (3) coloured including white, cream, ginger, red, brown, or black. They have three digits on their hind limbs and four digits on their front limbs.

Physical Attributes:

- **Size (adult):** 15cm in length
- **Weight (adult):** 700 - 900gms for females and 900 -1200gms for males
- **Life span:** 4 -6 years
- **Sexual maturity:** Males 4 months, females 3 - 4 months.

Behaviour:

Normal: Guinea pigs tend to spend a lot of time hiding. As they mature, they like routines with set environments and consistent handling regimes. Changes to routines can cause stress so should be avoided.

Socialisation: They are used to living in groups and are very social animals. Ideal ratios for breeding are one male to 3-6 females. Groups of single sex are fine together from a young age. It is not recommended to mix guinea pigs with rabbits due to disease risks and bullying from rabbits.

Activity levels (hibernation etc.): Guinea Pigs are very busy when young but become less active as they mature. They are very messy, shredding straw and paper and are difficult to toilet train.

Environment:

Housing/Space: Guinea pigs can be kept in a variety of cages and cage sizes vary depending on the number kept. If housing two guinea pigs, the minimum cage dimensions should be 1.5 m long x 0.8m wide x 0.3m high. Aim to provide as large a cage as possible, especially if housing colonies. A solid, slip-free surface with dust-free

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bedding is preferred. Suitable bedding materials include straw, hay, or shredded paper. Sufficient bedding material should be provided to allow guinea pigs to tunnel and burrow under. If providing upper storeys and ramps, ensure they cannot fall off. If kept outdoors a hutch with separate housing and grazing areas is preferred

Movement: Guinea pigs do not climb or jump so enclosures do not need to be overly high. Their legs and nails can get trapped in wire flooring so avoid these types of enclosures. Guinea pigs can stampede if agitated and injure themselves. They love to hide so provide ample hiding tunnels, boxes, and tubes in their enclosure.

Water: Fresh clean water must be available daily for drinking. Dripper type water bottles are preferred over bowls as they are easier to keep clean. Offering two bottles is preferred in case one becomes blocked.

Temperature: Outdoor hutches should be out of direct sunlight, wind and inclement weather and a shaded area should always be provided. Guinea pigs are very vulnerable to heat stress (>25°C). In hot weather they should be moved out of the direct sun by being placed under verandas or moved indoors. Indoor hutches should not be placed in direct sunlight and be free from draughts, fumes and away from heaters. Indoor hutches without a roof should be a minimum of 0.3m in height.

Lighting: Natural lighting inside and outside is sufficient.

Covering: All hutches, cages, and enclosures especially those outdoors, MUST BE ENCLOSED to prevent attacks from predators.

Shelter: They must have an enclosed area (with no viewing) to retreat to with ideally more than one offered if housing multiple guinea pigs.

Cleaning: As they are extremely messy guinea pigs require daily checking and spot cleaning and weekly full cage cleaning. Food containers must be cleaned daily. Heavily soiled materials including paper, bedding and straw should be removed daily to prevent ammonia and moisture build up. Detergent and hot water or a very mild disinfectant can be used for cleaning. Ensure the cage is dry before setting up the enclosure again.

Feeding:

Diet: Guinea pigs require a balanced diet of hay, commercial guinea pig pellets and fresh produce. They can be fussy eaters so any dietary changes should be gradual. Providing a variety of foods from a young age can also prevent this later in life. Pellets should be stored in an air-tight container to prevent fouling.

Daily requirements: Guinea pigs MUST HAVE a source of vitamin C in their diet so ensure that an appropriate diet is fed to meet this dietary need. Guinea pigs need a constant source of grass or grass hay (e.g., timothy, oaten or ryegrass hay) to provide a complete diet and aid with dental health through chewing. Lucerne and clover hays are too high in protein and calcium and should be avoided. Fresh vegetables and herbs should also be offered daily including red capsicum, broccoli, kale, dark leafed lettuce varieties, parsley, dandelion, dill, and mint. Reliable sources of vitamin C include red capsicum, kale, broccoli, and parsley. Guinea pig pellets should be used to supplement their diet and not be fed ad lib.

Supplementary feeding: Staff should talk to their local Pet shop staff or Veterinarian for further dietary advice, including foods deemed safe to feed.

Equipment: Water sipper with the capacity for 0.5 - 1 litre of water. A hay holder to prevent spoilage and a pellet hopper holding sufficient pellets throughout the day are ideal. Guinea pigs will spill water bowls if offered and defecate and urinate in them regularly, so they will need constant checking, cleaning, and refilling.

Breeding:

- **Gestation period:** An average of 60 -70 days.
- **Number of offspring:** Anywhere from 1 -10, average is 4 -5. Have 3 -5 litters per year.

Mating: Males are sexually active from 3 months and will breed with any available female after each litter is born.

Pregnancy: If breeding, females must be allowed to have their first litter before 6 months of age. If they are bred after this time, they may not be able to give birth naturally as their pelvis can fuse and will require a caesarian. Females can continue to provide litters. At birth babies weigh approximately 100gms, have a full set of teeth, are fully mobile and covered in fur.

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Handling:	<p>Humans: Only adults and high school aged children when supervised should handle guinea pigs. Younger children should only observe, patting them on the back while being held by an adult. Only one student should handle an animal in any one session keeping handling sessions short. Handling should be gentle and calm to prevent distress and injury. They rarely bite or scratch but may do so if frightened, so holding them in a towel when handling is recommended. They should always be lifted using two hands. Grasp them gently but firmly under the chest with one hand, while supporting the rear quarters with the other hand so their entire body is fully supported when holding them. They should be placed gently onto the ground not dropped down.</p> <p>Equipment: Towels should always be on hand for low-stress handling.</p> <p>Transport: They can be carried in well-ventilated carry boxes or cages lined with straw, hay or newspaper and always provide a place for them to hide. Transport quickly and do not leave unattended or allow them to get hot. Do not transport on days that are over 32 degrees.</p>
Hygiene:	<p>Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds after working with or handling guinea pigs. Dry hands with clean paper towel or an air dryer. Turn off the tap with the paper towel if possible. Follow first aid procedures should a bite occur.</p>
Signs of illness:	<p>Indicators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• loss of appetite;• hair loss;• diarrhea;• discharges from the mouth, nose, or eyes;• infections;• coughing and/or gasping;• growths;• weight loss;• scratching;• lameness; or• dribbling. <p>Common conditions seen in guinea pigs include lice, dental malalignment, vitamin C deficiency and foot issues from poor husbandry, diet, and cleaning. Guinea pigs' teeth continue to grow throughout their life, and they need an appropriate diet to prevent teeth problems. Guinea pigs use coprophagy (eat their fresh faeces) to maintain their gut health so avoid removing the faeces straight way after they defecate.</p>
Treatments:	<p>Schools are encouraged to develop a relationship with a Veterinarian and animal industry representatives (e.g., pet shop staff) familiar with guinea pigs. These contacts can be used for disease diagnoses, treatment options and dietary, husbandry and welfare advice. Veterinarians can also assist with emergencies particularly when euthanasia is needed. It is important to ensure that any treatments used are not toxic.</p>
Disposal/fate planning:	<p>When no longer required Guinea pigs must be rehomed. Guinea pigs can be desexed by a Veterinarian to aid rehoming. As an introduced species they must NEVER be released into the environment. Bodies must be disposed of correctly in accordance with local council regulations.</p>
Euthanasia:	<p>When an illness or injury is such that recovery is unlikely then the guinea pig must be euthanised by a Veterinarian. Schools should contact their local Veterinarian to discuss emergency treatment options prior to an event occurring when keeping guinea pigs on-site. Any adverse events including death must be reported to the NGSaec using the ADVERSE EVENTS form. Forms must be returned to the NGSaec within seven days of the event occurring.</p>
Holiday and weekend care:	<p>Guinea pigs can be sent home for weekend or holiday care with students providing consent is received from the school Principal and the parents. Staff should provide carers with animal care and record-keeping instructions, emergency contacts and provide appropriate equipment and food. Animal must be checked daily, records kept</p>

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and any problems reported to the school immediately whether kept onsite or taken offsite.

Approved activities: **Where an activity is not listed in this SOP, approval must be sought from the NGSaec and confirmed before it can be undertaken.**

Activity: **a. BREEDING OF GUINEA PIGS IN THE CLASSROOM**

Category: Category 2

Objective: To demonstrate the methods of breeding guinea pigs to students

Activity: Schools should consult with an animal industry representative or Veterinarian before undertaking this activity. There are several resources listed in the Resources section of this document that can show guinea pig birthing via videos instead. Schools must also ensure they have planned for the additional animals because of breeding with regards to resources and rehoming.

Category: **b. THE APPROPRIATE CARE OF CLASSROOM PET GUINEA PIGS**

Objective: Category 2

To demonstrate the appropriate care of guinea pigs as classroom pets to students

Activity: Handling should be kept to a minimum where possible.

Category: **c. CAPTURE, RESTRAINT AND HANDLING OF GUINEA PIGS**

Objective: Category 2

To demonstrate the appropriate methods for capture, restraint, and handling of guinea pigs.

Activity: Staff must be competent in capture, restraint and handling methods and guinea pig behaviour prior to undertaking this activity. Improper handling methods can cause injuries to the guinea pigs compromising their welfare.

Category: **d. MEASUREMENT OF BODY WEIGHT, BODY CONDITION, GROWTH AND BODY PROPORTIONS (NON-INVASIVE)**

Objective: Category 2

To demonstrate the methods for measuring weight, condition, growth, and body proportions of guinea pigs to students.

All equipment must be ready prior to capturing and restraining guinea pigs. Handling should be kept to a minimum.

Activity:

Category: **e. ADMINISTRATION OF ORAL AND TOPICAL TREATMENTS TO GUINEA PIGS**

Objective: Category 2

To demonstrate the correct methods for administering oral and topical treatments to guinea pigs

Activity: Handling should be kept to a minimum. Some products are not safe for guinea pigs so talk to your Veterinarian or Animal Industry expert (e.g., pet shop staff) prior to administration.

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Category: f. COAT CARE AND GROOMING

Objective: Category 2

To demonstrate the basics of coat care and grooming of guinea pigs to students

Guinea pigs familiar with handling should be chosen for participation in this activity. Handling should be restricted to brief time periods. Ensure equipment is clean and suitable for guinea pigs (e.g., brushes) prior to use.

Resources:

Guidelines for the Housing of Guinea Pigs in Scientific Institutions

<https://www.animaethics.org.au/home>

Guinea pig housing - The Humane Society of the United States

www.humanesociety.org/resources/guinea-pig-housing

How should I care for my guinea pig? - RSPCA Australia

www.rspca.org.au/blog/2019/how-should-i-care-my-guinea-pig

Owning a guinea pig – Vet Voice

www.vetvoice.com.au/ec/pet-ownership/owning-a-guinea-pig/

Pet care – Guinea Pigs care and feeding – Sydney Exotics and Rabbit Vets

www.exoticvet.com.au/pet-care

Guinea Pigs Australia:

- **Guinea pig breeds**

guineapigsaustralia.com.au/guinea%20pig%20breeds.htm

Guinea pig giving birth

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca7P6m5wvZQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FZAktB2DN4>

Handling Guinea pig video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9wWFysKkIY>