



Rabbits and Guinea Pigs as Pets

Life expectancy: Rabbits live up to 12 years, guinea pigs up to 8 years.

Costs

Animal	60-120 CHF	Depends on whether the animals are castrated or not
Initial costs	600-2000 CHF	Species-adequate enclosure, food bowls, water bowls, insulated huts and shelters, elevated platforms, tubes,...
Annual costs	ca. 500 CHF	Food, veterinary expenses, stays in an animal shelter or pension during holidays, or animal pet-sitting at home
Varia	Unforeseen veterinary costs can greatly exceed the price of purchase of the animals.	

Guinea pigs and rabbits are locomotory very active animals

Even before deciding for guinea pigs or rabbits as pets, future pet owners need to inform themselves thoroughly by asking experienced rabbit or guinea pig owners or specialists as well as by reading the relevant technical literature. Conventional cages are too small and do not cover the needs of the animals, since neither guinea pigs nor rabbits can move sufficiently around in such cages. Both muscles as well as natural behaviour atrophy under these conditions. The predominant cause of death on guinea pigs is heart failure due lack of locomotion! **Guinea pigs or rabbits should not be petted or cuddled.** They are very susceptible to stress. For the wellbeing of these animals, they should be housed in large enclosures allowing for locomotion. Indoors, guinea pigs need at least 1.5 to 2 m² (for example the SAP-recommended vivarium), outdoors, they need at least 4m² (for example an outdoor enclosure with a SAP recommended "Niesenhütte" for the night). Rabbits are not suitable for housing indoors, since they cannot express their full behavioural repertoire there (including digging!), due to lack of space. They need at least 6m² or more outdoors. The enclosure must include several insulated, protected shelters or huts and structures to hide in. Additionally, a partly shadowy place offers protection from summer heat. The fence has to reach down into the ground for at least 30cm to prevent rabbits from breaking out (and foxes or martens from breaking in).

Rabbits and guinea pigs are social animals

Guinea pigs live in harem groups (one male, several females), rabbits in family clans. Both species are very social and need socially compatible conspecifics for their wellbeing. Both housing them singly and housing them as a guinea pig – rabbit pair is not advisable, since the two species differ completely in their social behaviour and cannot replace each other a social partner of the same species. Best, a castrated guinea pig male is housed with one or more females (or only castrated males or only females). Rabbits can be housed in pairs with a castrated male. Housing females together tends to be difficult due to female quarrels...

Where to buy? What to pay attention to?

Guinea pigs and rabbits should be bought from animal shelters run by local animal protection organisations, at the rodent shelter or at good pet shops branded with the quality label by Swiss Animal Protection SAP, where customers are given expert advice and the animals are kept in optimal enclosures. Choose animals with sleek, shiny fur, clean nose and bright eyes. Do not buy animals with extreme characteristics such as dwarfism, long fur or hanging ears. Small rabbits (“dwarf” gene) have often problems with their teeth, and need to be brought to the vet regularly to have their teeth (incisors and/ or molars) cut. Long fur can also be problematic since the fur gets into tangles and needs to be cut. Prefer animals with short hairs.

What do guinea pigs need?

Guinea pigs are prey animals in nature – over 30 predator species prey upon them. They always use the same paths leading from one bush or shelter to the other, just to dash under the next shelter structure when there is any danger apparent. In captivity, guinea pigs therefore need many shelters to hide beneath, such as huts, tubes (cork or clay) or dense branches (pine) as cover. They also need several such structures to get out of each other’s way if they wish to. These shelter structures should only be lifted for cage cleaning and the animals should never be caught from their shelters, since this will lead to stress and suffering. Guinea pigs are quite sensitive to heat. Take care in summer: guinea pigs can die from heat stroke! As long as it is dry, and as long as enough space (4 m²) and insulated shelters are available, cold weather does not affect guinea pigs very much.

What do rabbits need?

Rabbits have the same needs irrespective of their breed and size. Housing them in conventional rabbit hutches does not cover their species specific needs. Their muscles and behaviour atrophy since they have neither enough space for hopping nor adequate substrate for digging. Keeping them in groups in large outdoor pens covers their needs much better. A rabbit enclosure should feature at least several insulated shelters or huts, tubes, tree-trunks and elevated platforms.

Species-specific nutrition

Both rabbits and guinea pigs are specialised to digest fibre-rich, nutrient-poor plant food such as grass, herbs and hay. Therefore, they should always have access to fresh hay (not mildewy!). Additionally, they should be provided with fresh salad and vegetables daily, guinea pigs also with fresh fruit such as apples, since these animals are unable to produce vitamin C in their bodies. Grain, pet-food mixtures and dried bread should be given only sparingly, since the animals tend to grow fat and are then liable to die early. Their digestive system is very sensitive and does not bear sudden changes in food composition. To wear off their constantly growing incisors, these animals need fresh branches daily, for gnawing, as food and as cover. Non-poisonous trees are: pine, spruce, fir, hazel, willow, beech, birch, linden/lime and unsprayed fruit trees.

Population control

Refrain from breeding these animals, since finding an adequate living place for the young in a species-adequate enclosure is very difficult or even impossible. Further, many of these long-lived animals wait for new owners in rescue shelters. Reproduction can be prevented by housing only same-sexed groups or by castrating the males. Rabbit and guinea pig males can be castrated very early on at the age of just a few weeks (prepubertary), and immediately be re-integrated into the group. Veterinarians will give advice and perform the castration.

Animals and holidays

The stress susceptible rabbits and guinea pigs should preferably be left at home in their familiar enclosure and be cared for by a competent, reliable "pet-sitter". As an alternative, they can also be brought to an animal shelter or pension, which costs 15-30 CHF per day. Abandoning animals is forbidden and can be punished with fines up to 20'000 CHF.

Rabbits, guinea pigs and kids

If housed according to the behavioural needs of the species, rabbits and guinea pigs offer interesting opportunities to observe natural behaviour. However, on their own, children cannot take care for these animals. An adult needs to guide and supervise them. Carrying these animals around or petting them is questionable. Despite their cuddly appearance, these stress-susceptible animals suffer when being lifted out of their enclosure, carried around and cuddled. Since guinea pigs do not resist to such treatment, it is often assumed that they like being petted, but stress physiology indicates that they are extremely stressed by such procedures. Rabbits tend to resist more often by scratching or kicking, but they also do not like being lifted and carried around.

Information and contacts

- „Guinea Pigs“, „Rabbits“ (german, french, italian), „Species-specific enclosures“, information leaflets by Swiss Animal Protection SAP, can be ordered for free by sending a C5 post-paid envelope with your own address.
Swiss Animal Protection SAP / Schweizer Tierschutz STS, Dornacherstrasse 101, P.O.Box, 4008 Basel, helpdesk, advice (german, french, [english](#)), brochures and orders 061 365 99 99, Fax 061 365 99 90, www.tierschutz.com, sts@tierschutz.com
- „Species-specific housing – a right for guinea pigs“ and „Species-specific housing – a right for rabbits“ (german), both 34.-- CHF, recommended books written by Ruth Morgenegg, tvb-Verlag, orders: Buch 2000, Versandbuchhandlung, Kellerrainstr. 2, 8912 Obfelden
- Rabbit and guinea pig hotline and rescue shelter: Ruth Morgenegg 0900 57 52 31 (2.13 CHF per minute), www.nagerstation.ch