

Cavies = Guinea Pigs

So you just bought your first cavy! Cavies are wonderful animals that have the potential to make your everyday life better for years to come.

Species:

Cavies do not exist in the wild and the scientists do not agree on how our pet cavies are related to their wild relatives. In general people say that our pet cavies belong to the species *Cavia porcellus*.

Adult size:

Usually around 1 kg, between 700 grams and 1400 grams is normal. There exists a variety of cavies, called cuy (same species as normal cavies) that grows up to 4,5 kg, but they are highly unusual.

Lifespan:

Cavies usually live for between 6 and 7 years, seldom over 7.5 years. A few live much longer.

Natural behaviour and social organization:

Cavies prefer living in groups, and have access to simple hiding places. Cavies are active around the clock, they only sleep for short periods of time, and are active in between. Cavies are foraging animals, and need to be able to search for their food, and not have it delivered in bowls.

Never keep a single cavy; this is a highly social animal. Most males will live happily together in a big enough cages, remember that cavies are large animals compared to other small pets, and need large cages. Often the male actually mistakes the gender of its cage mate and treat his as a female, even trying to mate. This behaviour between males is normal and

will NOT lead to fights. A few individuals don't like each other and need another cage mate.

Cages and environment:

Cavies are large animals compared to other small pets, and therefore need large cages! A minimum size is 100x60 cm for two females and 120x60 cm for two males. Cavies are typical indoor animals; they prefer the same temperatures indoors as you, and cannot tolerate draughts. They need an at least 7 to 10 cm deep layer of bedding in the cage, and their cage need cleaning out every week, preferably on the same day of the week. On top of the bedding they need a layer of hay, both to search for food in (they eat the best pieces) and to keep the bedding inside the cage. Cavies need hiding places inside their cages, these hiding places can be very simple, just a roof in a corner. Place the roof low enough so the cavy keeps snug under it, and can jump up on top of it if the cavy pleases. Without hiding places many cavies run around the cage and break their front teeth.

Cavies need to exercise on a daily basis, so you either buy or build them a really big cage, or you let them out on the floor for about two hours every day. Cavies that are let out like this are prone to bite on electric cables. A simple way to protect cables is to shield them with something. Two options I know of: either cut plastic bottles open lengthwise and put them on the electric cable, or buy simple water cables (the kind used for aquaria is fine) and cut them open lengthwise, and put them on the electric cables. If you open the cage permanently the cavies will not be interested in electric cables, and they will exercise on their own, and they also will place most of their droppings and such inside the cage instead of on your floor.

Escape proof cages:

Cavies are not prone to escape, and are usually kept in cages without tops. Only if you have both males and females in the same room there is a reason to escape proof some cages; the cages with males. Some males can do a lot to break out of their own cage and break in to the cage of a female in heat.

Environmental changes:

Cavies that are not kept in close cages, but have access to the floor, will be very interested and will subject to close examination all pieces of furniture in the home that are rearranged, or when you buy new furniture.

Care:

Cavies need to be fed on a daily basis; they need to be checked for injuries on a daily basis and their nails need to be trimmed every two weeks. They need to get new fresh water in their water bottle every day. Cavies trim their teeth by themselves, so you don't need to give them chewing blocks, (that story is just a fairy tale). You can bathe your cavy a few times per year, but if you do, make absolutely sure they are totally dry before putting them back into their cage again. Longhaired cavies are not harder to care for than shorthaired cavies, but cavies do not like it when their fur gets too long. A true longhaired cavy has fur that grows 2 to 3 cm per month. So you will have to act as your cavies' hairdresser several times a year. You can make the best out of this by giving your cavy a different hair-do every time. There is one general rule – females should have short hair on the rump, so they don't pee in their fur.

Cavies and children:

Small children are not equipped to handle cavies on their own, they need supervision,

since cavies are very susceptible to injuries if handled without care or dropped on the floor. You should not have cavies in the family unless at least one adult takes responsibility for the care of the animals.

Food and nutritional requirements:

Cavies do not need pellets or any treats from the pet shop. Cavies need lots of good quality hay; hay for horses is fine, as long as it is not mouldy. **Give new hay every day.** They also need vegetables in some form. During summer you can pick grass and edible herbs, far away from cars and peeing dogs. Be sure to know which herbs are edible or pick only grass. If you can find dandelions they are good too. Several herbs are poisonous. Give them as much as they can eat - everyday!

Other times of the year you must provide vegetables. One cavy eats the same amount of vegetables as a medium to large carrot, daily. The best vegetables for cavies are carrots and some kind of kale, these are also cheap, and they should be in the daily diet of your cavies. Cavies need Vitamin C to be added to their diet, **and by giving these amounts or vegetables, or grass, every day you are already providing enough Vitamin C for a healthy cavy.** A sick cavy need more Vitamin C daily, and that is best provided by giving vegetables and fruit that contains more Vitamin C than carrots and kale, for example celery and kiwi. Other sources of Vitamin C will just give the already sick cavy stomach upsets.

If you give your cavy a salt lick, you will shorten its lifespan; cavies are sensitive to the minerals in salt licks.

If your cavy need extra energy in its food since it is growing fast or is thin for some other reasons, give it oats, whole or in flakes, in a bowl. If you want to give your cavies a bowl with dry food, and they don't need to get any fatter, give them barley in flakes. Do not give them pellets, since that shortens their lifespan. There actually

exists a brand of pellets that is safe to give, but cavies do get fat very fast from those pellets, and that is the timothy based pellets from Oxbow. This special brand of pellets is very good for sick cavies, though. Remember that Oxbow produces ordinary pellets also, and they are not safe for cavies.

Handling:

In order to catch a timid cavy you need to carefully move your hands in the cage so that the animal places itself in a corner of the cage. Then you must slowly move both hands towards the cavy. Take slowly hold of the cavy with both hands and lift it out of the cage, and then hold it close to your own body. Smaller cavies are best caught by holding one hand under it and one hand above it, so it lays in one hand and the other hand stops it from jumping or running away. A bigger cavy is best caught by holding one hand at each end, and then changing positions when you have brought it out of the cage.

Carry the cavy close to your body, using both hands to keep it steady.

When putting the cavy back into its cage, always put it in with its back first and its head towards you. This way it cannot easily run straight into its cage and break its teeth.

The first time at home:

Cavies usually take two weeks to get used to a new home. Do not let untamed cavies out on the floor; tame them first, even if it takes weeks.

Taming cavies:

Cavies are easy to tame, just catch them carefully, and hold them close to you. The more time you have them in your lap, the sooner they are tamed. If you have them up a lot – always remember to feed them! Cavies need a lot of food all the time! A fast way to tame cavies is to feed them in your lap, try everything they like to eat.

Breeding:

Do not breed your pet cavy if you wish to keep her. That risk that she will die is much bigger than you might believe. Either leave breeding to the breeders or join a cavy club and learn from other breeders.

More information:

Check out my web site at
<http://goto.glocalnet.net/matsvin>

Cavy Clubs All Over World:
<http://goto.glocalnet.net/mars/cavyclub.htm>