



Guinea Pig Helpline Factsheet

Bathing Guinea Pigs

There are many reasons for bathing guinea pigs. It is true that it should not be done too often as excessive bathing can do more harm than good, drying the skin out and stripping the coat of its natural oils, but monthly bathing is beneficial, especially given the species' tendency to develop fungal and parasitic skin conditions.

Bathing is deemed **necessary** in the following situations:

- a) An active fungal or parasitic skin condition;
- b) After treating for mites, to cleanse the skin;
- c) Is dirty, especially the long-haired breeds, to prevent flystrike and matting.

There are times when bathing guinea pigs is not advised. Specific times include when a guinea pig is suffering a respiratory illness or undiagnosed illness. The risk of the guinea pig falling ill or having their condition deteriorate is too high in these situations, as they are more susceptible to illness when they are damp.

Setting Up

As already mentioned, ensure the conditions are right for bathing your piggies. If they are outdoor guineas and it's the middle of winter, then it's probably not a good idea to bath them unless absolutely necessary (i.e. if very dirty, or for medical reasons); if it is necessary then make plans to keep the affected piggies indoors for the rest of the winter months.

In terms of 'equipment' you need very little; the basics are:

1. A sink/bathtub/washing bowl;
2. Suitable shampoo;
3. Towels – at least two per pig.

The use of a shower head or jug can greatly improve rinsing, which is especially useful when bathing to cleanse the skin of parasites and fungal spores.

It is a good idea to bath guineas one at a time, rather than having multiple pigs in the tub at the same time, particularly when treating skin complaints. It can also help to lay a bath mat or a flannel cloth on the base of the sink/bathtub/washing bowl to prevent the guinea from slipping. Each piggie should have their own towels – don't share towels between multiple pigs – and ensure all clean piggies go back into clean cages.

For those new to bathing piggies, I would recommend placing a washing bowl in the bathtub instead of using the sink, and having an extra pair of hands at the ready is also advised where possible if you've not yet found your confidence. Once you have your confidence with bathing piggies then moving onto a sink may make the job easier.

The Shampoo

The question of what shampoos are safe is a frequent one and a lot comes down to what the individual owner feels is suitable. The first thing to consider is why you are bathing the piggies – is it for a routine cleanse, or to treat a skin problem?

Many owners will advocate the use of human shampoos, but many will also provide opinions on why human shampoos are not ideal for guinea pigs; these conflicting ideas does not help confused owners unsure of what to do for the best. It is worth bearing in mind that **unless backed up by anecdotal evidence**, what is claimed is typically just a personal opinion – exactly the same as concerned parents wary of using widely available shampoos containing certain chemicals, which some claim may be detrimental to the health and wellbeing of their human babies and children.

In all cases I have come across in the argument against the use of non-guinea shampoos, I have yet to see anecdotal evidence to show the unsuitability of it, whereas I have heard – and experienced - plenty of cases where the use of a human shampoo has done no harm whatsoever to guinea pigs, and where the use of a human product has solved a fungal or parasitic skin condition.

It is also worth remembering an unsavoury fact often overlooked, which is that most human shampoos are tested on animals before being allowed for human use – if it was damaging to the lab animals (sometimes guinea pigs) it would not be made available.

However it remains good practice with **all** skin products to do a patch test on **all** animals 24 hours prior to application for their intended use.

Some widely available shampoos that have been widely used for dealing with various skin problems include:

Anti-Parasitics –Fleaordie; Johnson’s Insecticidal Shampoo; Lyclear Crème Rinse

Anti-Fungals –Nizoral; Alphosyl; Polytar; diluted Povidone Iodine; Malaseb

Anti-Fungal Dips (for severe infections, used after anti-fungal shampoos) – Imaverol; Mycophyte

For more specific and required information on treating a fungal or parasitic skin problem, please email me on guineapighelpline@hotmail.co.uk and I will send the relevant Factsheet.

Shampoos I have personally used multiple times on my guinea pigs with no adverse reactions or problems – and which have aided in curing a skin problem:

Fleaordie; Nizoral; Alphosyl; diluted Povidone Iodine; Imaverol.



The Water

It is not essential to fill the tub or sink with water when bathing piggies – some find that with the use of a jug or shower head, the water can drain away with no need to keep refreshing bath water. If choosing this method, it is an idea to ensure the plughole is covered with a flannel cloth and keep piggie away from the plug, to prevent any chances of trapped feet .

If filling the tub or sink, the ideal depth of water is no more than **two to two-and-a-half inches**, or around **5-6cm**. Smaller guineas will obviously need a shallower bath, while the more chunky piggies (with longer legs!) may need the higher end of the guideline. A good general guideline without using measurements, is that when the pig is standing normally, the water would at the very least reach the pigs underside (belly), but never go higher than the neck. It is important that the guinea is able to stand comfortably and does not need to stretch in any way to keep their head out of the water.

To check the temperature, it is much the same as checking if a baby's bathwater is the right warmth. If it feels hot to you, then it is too hot for the guinea; if it feels cold to you, it's too cold for the guinea. It should simply feel comfortable. Also be sure to check that the temperature of the water is even throughout; those without mixer taps can find that there are various hot and cold patches in the water until mixed well by hand.

Cleaning Boar's Bits

Penis and Anal Sac – When you have learned how to safely extrude your boar's penis (a good vet, rodentologist or very experienced owner can show you how) it is worth checking and cleaning this on a regular basis e.g. weekly, or at every monthly bath. With an unscented wet wipe remove all residues and debris; hay, hair and bedding have all been known to collect around the penis. Please also note that it is not uncommon to see a whiteish "worm" in your boar's bits – this is ejaculate, not a worm, and is nothing to worry about; simply remove it as with the rest of the debris. Also do not worry if you see two "prongs" near the tip of the penis – this is normal and they should not be removed! When checking the anal sac, again any debris such as hay, hair and bedding should be wiped out with an unscented wipe. If there is a mass within the anal sac it is possible that the boar is impacted. He will need his anal sac checking daily and emptying as often as required; if you are unsure how, again a good vet/rodentologist/experienced owner will show you - no products or special skills are necessary, just practice.

Grease Gland - All guinea pigs have a grease gland located at the base of their spine, roughly where the tail would be if they had one. It is harder to find on some pigs than others, but boars in particular tend to have quite active grease glands, and locating it will be made easier by the greasy circle you can feel - and in some cases see! The photos below show the position of the grease gland.



Cleaning the grease gland – along with cleaning the penis and anal sac - should be the first thing you do when bathing a male guinea pig; removing the grease will ensure the gland stays clean and healthy. Some females have active grease glands too, but it's significantly more common for boars to have active glands. Normal shampoo will not shift the grease; a product formulated for degreasing is needed. Products that have been widely, safely and effectively used include:

1. Washing-up liquid;
2. Swarfega;
3. Paxcutol shampoo.

Massage into the grease gland with a wet hand. After a minute or so of massaging, the grease will start to loosen up and you can gently remove the grease with ease, and move onto bathing the rest of his body.

Bathing Guinea Pigs

A personal or video demonstration of how to bath a guinea pig would naturally be easier to follow, and it only ever gets easier with practice, but the following tips should give you a basic idea of the routine.



1. Place the guinea in the bath. Keep your hands close to the piggie. Every pig is different in their comfort level in the bath. Some pigs are more comfortable if they cannot see you, while some are more comfortable if they can. Try sitting the guinea facing away from you initially and gauge his reaction. If the pig is a “jumper”, who tries to exit the bath at every opportunity, keep a gentle but firm grip on him. It is generally advised not to try and hold the guinea down as this may prevent him moving his head up away from the water when necessary, so instead practice a gentle but firm grip which prevents the pig from leaping away. It also helps to have another person to hand - just in case you do need to hold the pig with two hands!
2. Wet the pig thoroughly all over using a shower head/jug. Do not pour water on the head, face or ears.
3. Pour a strip of shampoo down the spine and one large blob in your hand, and gently but thoroughly lather the pig up all over the body, once again avoiding the face and ears.
4. Using the foam resulting from lathering the body, clean the face and ears well. This must be done with care to ensure that the eyes, nose and mouth are not filled with water or

shampoo foam. Use a small sponge, moist flannel or cloth - wet, but not dripping - to wet the hair on the face by wiping the cloth around all the hair on the face. Collect some foam from the rest of the body, and massage it into the hair all over the face and the back, underside and visible folds of the ears.

5. Leave the shampoo to soak into the guinea for the recommended time (*5-10 minutes according to the relevant advice on treating fungal or parasitic conditions*). To rinse the face use a small sponge, moist flannel or cloth as before, and rinse the rest of the body thoroughly with fresh water from the shower head or jug.
6. Remove the pig from the bath and wrap in a towel to dry.

Drying

When the pig is wrapped in the towel having been removed from the bathwater, simply let the towel absorb as much moisture as possible for a minute or two. Then transfer the guinea to a fresh towel and massage the hair well until no more moisture can be absorbed. The guinea pig will not be completely dry, but in this “damp” state he can either be let back into his clean cage indoors, or into an exercise pen in a warm room for a few hours to dry off naturally – fully ensuring that he stays warm.

You can use a hairdryer to dry the pig more thoroughly, but some guineas react badly to the sound and feel of hairdryers, so this should be taken into account. For those who are not too bothered by a hairdryer, remember to keep your hand between the pig and the hairdryer to check that the heat remains consistent and does not get too warm. Do not use a high heat, and do try to avoid using the loudest/fastest setting.

Cleaning the Ears

Sometimes it is enough to clean the piggies ears as detailed earlier in the document (using shampoo foam during the bathing process). Sometimes however it is not enough, ear wax can build up very quickly in many piggies. Dirty ears are an invitation for parasites i.e. ear mites, which love the waxy environment; ear mites are a common cause of irritation, head shaking, scratching at the ears, grainy deposits around the eyes and ears, and even eventual head tilt.

Routinely cleaning the ears at least once a month is a habit well worth getting into. For particularly waxy ears a deeper clean can be achieved by using a product called Otodex Veterinary Ear Drops. They are formulated for cats and dogs, but can be used safely in guinea pigs either as a general cleaning solution or to treat an active case of ear mites. As an alternative, a drop or two of Olive Oil or mineral oil could be used to soften the wax in the ears. For general cleaning:

1. Apply 2-3 drops into the folds of each ear, and massage the ear well to ensure good coverage;
2. Leave for up to 24 hours;
3. Use a cotton bud or slightly damp flannel/cloth, clean the visible surfaces of the ears, including the folds and the ear flap. *Do not push anything down into the ear canal.*

Repeat up to twice more if the ears are especially dirty. If ear mites are suspected, treatment with anti-parasitic ear drops e.g. Johnson’s Ear Drops (containing pyrethrum) can be successful.