



Guinea Pig Helpline Factsheet

Is it Possible to Overfeed Guinea Pigs?

There are four main aspects of a guinea pig's diet:

- Hay and other forages;
- Dry food;
- Fresh fruits and vegetables;
- Water.

The most essential is hay and forages; this should make up at least 80% of the diet. Forages may include fresh or dried grass, dried herbs, and wild plants and safe weeds. Hay and grass are the two most important of forages as they help the most with dental wear and digestion.

I have been asked many times about the importance of grass in the diet. Guinea pigs can do very well without grass, it is not vital, but hay/dried grass must be provided in its place. On the flipside, some guinea pigs in some parts of the world survive without any hay –but please note that such reliance on grass is something that is introduced very carefully and gradually, and is extremely difficult to maintain 24/7 and year round, due to changing weather and grass quality. If you include grass in the diet, introduce it slowly (small amounts and/or short grazing time) and build up the amount of grass on offer in a controlled manner. Failing to do so can lead to diarrhea or bloat.

After hay and forages, fresh fruits and vegetables are the next in order of importance, also essential but only making up around 15% of the diet. Dry food is really of very low importance, only 5% of the overall diet, although there may be some benefits if a good quality feed is offered.

When should I give them hay and forages? How much do they need? Can I overfeed hay and forages?

Hay must be available at all times, and it's best to give them a lot more than you are expecting them to eat! Hay is vital to keep the digestion running smoothly, and to promote healthy dental wear, as well as preventing boredom. Dried and/or fresh grasses can also be offered ad lib, but guinea pigs must be introduced to such grasses over time; start off with allowing them only one handful or half an hour of grazing and gradually increase the time and amount they're allowed.

Particularly if you give their hay on the floor to use as bedding, it's a good idea to make sure you keep a handful in a hay rack raised off the floor; even if they ignore the rack, the idea is that if they soil the hay on the ground they still have the option of some clean hay to eat.

Overfeeding hay is **not** really possible. Guinea pigs are typically pretty good at eating what they need. If a piggy is favouring hay to the point where veggies are being refused or ignored (it does not matter if the dry feed is barely touched), then it is something of a problem - you will need to keep the guinea away from hay while you offer the veggies, as piggies do need the nutrients and vitamins provided in their fresh veg.

Overfeeding grasses and forages is possible. As explained earlier, grasses must be introduced slowly, as overindulging in fresh or dried grass when their tummies aren't used to it can lead to diarrhea or bloat. Grasses can be given ad lib eventually, but it must be limited for some time before they're allowed longer access to it.

Forages like wild plants/weeds/dried herbs can also be overfed like veggies; too much of some plants can lead to digestive upsets. Small amounts of a variety tends to work best.

What if they empty the dry food bowl? Should I top it up right away? **Can I overfeed dry food?**

Young guineas, and pregnant sows, should generally be allowed to eat as much dry food as they wish - provided their intake of dry food is not affecting their interest in their hay and veggies.

For adult guinea pigs, or those older than 6 months, the best way to tackle this is to give them less each time you fill the bowl. Give them half of what you would normally give them, and then give them the rest later in the day. Try not to top up the bowl as soon as they empty it!

Remember dry food is not particularly important in the diet. If they run out of dry food a few hours before it's time to refill the bowls, they will not be as affected as they might try to make you think! Make sure they have plenty of hay; this is what they will turn to when they realise they aren't getting more dry food.

You **can** overfeed dry food, and it becomes a problem both when the pig is suffering excess weight gain, and when the piggies are refusing hay or fresh fruits and veggies. One way to prevent the pigs indulging too much in dry food is to offer a high quality, hay-based plain pellet. These are usually quite filling so your guineas will be less inclined to "pig out" on them.

They keep wheeking at me and biting the bars, wanting more fresh fruit/veggies - is it ok to keep giving in and letting them have treats throughout the day? **Can I overfeed fruit and veg?**

Again, try not to give in to their demands! If they are very demanding piggies, you should find that putting together a small salad twice daily will help.

You **can** overfeed fruit and veg; in particular too much fruit, too many leafy greens and too many watery veggies (such as cucumber and melon) can lead to diarrhoea. Variety and moderation are key - small amounts of lots of different things work better than lots of a few things.

If your piggies do pester you for treats in between their main salads and hay/dry food top-ups, it's worth buying in a few different types of hay to give them on the occasions they are determined to wear down your resolve!

