



## Guinea Pig Helpline Factsheet

## **Social Behaviours in Guinea Pigs**

Many of the questions sent to the Helpline concern the social behaviours of guinea pigs; there is a lot of confusion over how to read behaviours between two or more piggies. Most of the time the guinea pigs are getting along very well, but as the owner is unsure of particular behaviours, they find themselves very unsure whether their piggies are happy together or not.

### **How to Encourage a Positive Companionship**

It often helps to look at everything other than the guinea pigs at first. Ensuring the environment is promoting a good relationship between them is the first step to determining whether there is anything you as an owner can do to improve the friendship between your guineas. Ways to help keep the peace between them include:

- Ensuring the cage space is large enough (see [www.guineapigcages.com](http://www.guineapigcages.com) for size guidelines);
- Allowing them the time and space each day to roam in a larger area (known as exercise or floor time).;
- At least hidey house and one feeding station for each guinea pig is provided within the cage - preferably a distance apart, so that both guinea pigs are given the chance to eat, drink and rest away from their friend.

It is entirely possible that you can do all of the above to encourage a healthy relationship and for things to still fail to improve, but nevertheless these are the basic ground rules to abide by, and to check if the piggies' friendship is called into question.

### **Normal Dominance Behaviours**

It is normal for the following behaviours to come and go within a group of guinea pigs. The behaviours tend to be at their peak when a new guinea pig is introduced to the group, or when there is a change in the environment i.e. if your guineas are new to you, or if they are moved into a new cage.

- Chasing
- Mounting
- Nipping (short sharp nips which do not break the skin)
- Sniffing the anus/genitals
- Rumblestrutting (rumbling sound accompanied by a slow, swaying walk)
- Raised hackles (hair that looks to be standing on end)
- Scent marking (dragging or wiping the bottom along the floor)
- Nose-offs (where both are facing each other and they throw their heads up repeatedly - one is usually trying to raise their nose higher than the other one)
- Mild teeth chattering (which does not persist for more than a moment or two).

## **Concerning Behaviours**

Many piggie pairings remain peaceful and contented for the duration of the guinea pigs' lives, but this is not always the case. At some point during a relationship – sometimes immediately, sometimes over time - there may be new signs developing that will warn you that the two guinea pigs are not getting along particularly well.

If you witness any of the following behaviours you should seriously consider separating the guineas or, at the very least, very closely monitoring them and being fully prepared to separate them.

Concerning behaviours include:

- Loud and persistent teeth chattering;
- Circling each other, especially when teeth chattering and raised hackles are evident;
- Cornering (driving one into the corner and using this advantage to nip and bully);
- Snorting (puffs of air through the nostrils);
- Lunging (jumping towards each other).

These behaviours frequently escalate to a ball-of-fur fight, and this fight must be broken up as soon as possible to prevent the guineas injuring each other. Never put your hand between fighting guinea pigs; instead, throw a light towel or cloth over them to split them up, then lift one guinea out of the situation. Do not put them back together again; while there is occasionally a success story beyond ball-of-fur fights, more often than not the piggies are simply not compatible and should not be reintroduced.

## **Bullying**

Bullying behaviour can be just as damaging – if not more damaging – than ball-of-fur fights. As mentioned earlier, it is normal for many mild dominance behaviours to come and go within a group, and as such it can be difficult to describe with words just where the line is between normal dominance and bullying. Perhaps the most helpful is to read others experiences of bullied guinea pigs. Two such examples are detailed in the following link:

<http://www.susieandpigs.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/bullying.htm>

Some key points to examine if a case of bullying is suspected include:

- Weekly weight trends - whether both guinea pigs are gaining, stable or losing weight.
- How the less dominant guinea pig seems to behave in general. Does she spend much of her time cowered in a corner? Does she seem to think twice before making any movements? Does she generally seem a lot more frightened of her environment than the other guinea pigs? Will she move around the cage at all when the dominant guinea pig is nearby?

If either of the guinea pigs is losing weight, especially the less dominant one, it is important that you separate them, as there is a chance that food consumption has dropped as a result of bullying. If the normal dominance behaviours seems to be very constant and persistent, and does not ease off as time goes on, it is usually in the guineas' best interests to separate them and attempt to find more compatible friends for each.

**Females**

It is very normal for a female to suddenly display signs of hormonal and dominant behaviour without prior warning - in particular chasing, mounting and rumbling - and for it to ease off as suddenly as it started, 12-24 hours later. This behaviour is usually explained by one or more females being in season, which can occur at different times or simultaneously for multiple sows. The behaviour is not always evident every time the female comes into season (once every 15 days, approximately).

A female who seems to act as though she is in season all the time, and/or seems to gradually become increasingly hormonally- and dominantly-behaved, should be examined for any further signs of ovarian cysts, as one of the main symptoms of cystic ovaries is sexually aggressive/very dominant behaviour that lasts beyond the norm expected of a female in season.