

## Rabbits and Guinea Pigs as Pets

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

### Costs

Animal	60-150 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,...
Yearly costs	ca. 500 CHF per animal	Food, veterinary expenses, sojourns in animal shelter or pension during holidays, or pet-sitting at home
Varia	Unforeseen veterinary costs can greatly exceed the purchase-price of the animals.	

### Guinea pigs and rabbits are 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, 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. 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 m<sup>2</sup> (for example the SAP-recommended Vivarium), outdoors, they need at least 4 m<sup>2</sup> (for example an outdoor enclosure or a SAP recommended "Niesenhütte bambino"). 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 6 m<sup>2</sup> 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 be buried at least 30 cm deep in the ground to prevent rabbits from breaking/digging 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 in their group for their wellbeing. Both housing them singly and housing them as a guinea pig – rabbit pair is not allowed in Switzerland. The two species differ completely in their social behaviour and cannot replace each other as a social partner. Best, a castrated guinea pig male is housed with one or more guinea pig females (or only castrated males or only females). Rabbits can be housed in pairs with a castrated male. Housing female rabbits 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 a local animal protection



organisation, at the rodent shelter or at good pet shops branded with the quality label VZFS Codex, 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 some need to be brought to the vet every two weeks to have their teeth (incisors and/ or molars) cut. Long fur can also be problematic since the fur tangles and needs to be cut. Animals with short fur are preferable.

Refrain from buying animals via the internet! You either support animal mass production under unspeakable conditions, or you might even be cheated.

### **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 any danger appears. In captivity, guinea pigs therefore need many shelters to hide in, such as huts, tubes (cork or clay) and 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 m<sup>2</sup>) and insulated shelters as well as conspecifics (>4 animals) are available, cold weather does not affect guinea pigs very much. They will just need more food during winter.

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 specialized to digest fibre-rich, nutrient-poor plant food such as grass, herbs and hay. Therefore, they must always have access to fresh hay (beware of mildew!). 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, and only to animals living outdoors year-round, since grain-fed indoor animals tend to become obese 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 at the age of just a few weeks (prepubertary, around 300g body weight), and immediately be re-integrated into the group. Veterinarians will give advice and perform the castration.

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## **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. Abandon of animals is forbidden in Switzerland and can be fined with 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, if they are 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 and need hours to recover. 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 / Schweizer Tierschutz STS, Dornacherstrasse 101, 4008 Basel, Phone 061 365 99 99, Fax 061 365 99 90, [www.tierschutz.com](http://www.tierschutz.com), [sts@tierschutz.com](mailto:sts@tierschutz.com): helpdesk, free advice (German, French, English), free brochures, addresses of shelters, children's club [www.krax.ch](http://www.krax.ch)
- Information brochures “Rabbits – species-adequate pet keeping” and “Guinea pigs – species-adequate pet keeping” (German, French, Italian), issued by the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office. Can be ordered for free from the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office (PDF or booklet), [www.bvet.admin.ch](http://www.bvet.admin.ch) and [www.tiererichtighalten.ch](http://www.tiererichtighalten.ch)
- „Species-specific housing – a right for guinea pigs“ and „Species-specific housing – a right for rabbits“ (German), both 34.-- CHF, highly recommended books, written by Ruth Morgenegg, Kaufmann-Verlag. Rabbit and guinea pig hotline and rescue shelter, rehoming of rabbits and guinea pigs: Ruth Morgenegg 0900 57 52 31 (2.13 CHF per minute), [www.nagerstation.ch](http://www.nagerstation.ch)

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