Name: _____ Date: _____

Why Guinea Pigs Need a Friend

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 995 words

Ines wanted one guinea pig, a fluffy one all her own. Her parents had said yes to guinea pigs, but her Aunt Rosa, who had kept them for years, shook her head. "Not one," she said. "Two." Ines frowned, because she could not see why such a small animal would need company so badly. "Let's start in the wild," said Aunt Rosa, "because that is where guinea pigs first learned how to be guinea pigs, long before anyone kept them in a house."

Guinea pigs come from the grasslands and lower slopes of the Andes Mountains in South America. There, they live in close family groups of five to ten, and several groups can live near each other as a colony. Their bodies and habits were built for life with others, which is why, when a pet guinea pig is left on its own for long stretches, it can develop odd behavior and suffer.

Ines chose two from a rescue, and she named them Sage and Dot. Within a day, a pattern began to show up. Sage pushed Dot away from the best spot, and Dot gave way. "That is a pecking order," said Aunt Rosa. "Guinea pigs quietly sort out who is the more bossy one. The best pairs find a way to get along, and that depends more on personality than on being a boy or a girl."

The next surprise was how much they ate, all day long. Guinea pigs are natural grazers. In the wild, they spend long stretches of the day and night eating grass, herbs, and leafy plants. So good hay should make up most of what a pet guinea pig eats, and it should be there at all times. Each day, Ines piled up fresh hay about as big as the guinea pigs themselves, and she spread it all around their home.

Hay does a second job that is just as important. A guinea pig's teeth never stop growing, and chewing tough hay wears them down to the right length and shape. The wrong food can lead to serious tooth trouble. Ines also gave them untreated wooden sticks to gnaw. "Teeth are not something you fix with a nail file," said Aunt Rosa. "If they grow too long, only a vet should handle it, so we help them by choosing the right food."

Then came the lesson about vitamin C. A guinea pig's body cannot make it and can store it only for a short time, so it has to come from food every day. Fresh parsley, celery, bell peppers, and cucumber are all good sources, and Ines rotated them to keep things interesting. Without enough, guinea pigs can get scurvy, a serious illness. Pellets also carry vitamin C, but it fades once the air reaches it, so Ines gave a fresh portion each day.

Watch a guinea pig for a while, and you can tell that it is a prey animal, which means it belongs to a kind that bigger animals hunt. It feels exposed in open space and likes to stay close to solid surfaces. A safe hiding place is not a luxury. There should be one more hiding

spot than there are guinea pigs, so that nobody gets stuck out in the open. Sage and Dot lived in a home with three.

Many animals that hunt guinea pigs are birds, so a hand that swoops from above can look like danger. Ines learned to sit low, to come in from the front, and to let them sniff her fingers first. When they were calm, she held one with a hand under its bottom and a hand around its chest. She never shouted, and she washed her hands with soap after touching them, their food, or their home.

Ines kept a simple daily list. She looked at each guinea pig to see if it was eating and moving normally. She added fresh vegetables and a fresh portion of pellets, and she checked that the hay was still piled high. Water came first on the list. She checked it twice a day, and she scooped out the dirty spots. The whole job took her about as long as a song, but it never got skipped, even on busy mornings.

Once a week, Ines and her parents cleaned the whole home, and they checked the front teeth and the nails together. Every single year, the guinea pigs also go to the vet for a checkup, even when they seem fine. "Cleaning too much bothers them," said Aunt Rosa, "and cleaning too little makes them unhealthy. A steady routine keeps the balance, because guinea pigs prefer to know what comes next."

A happy guinea pig shows its feelings through a lot of little signs. It is awake and busy for much of the day, chewing, wandering, and tunneling into the hay. It runs through its pipes. Young ones do a high, playful hop called popcorning. Ines laughed the first time Dot did it. Aunt Rosa grinned too. "That tells you they feel safe and have enough room," she said. "A frightened guinea pig does not leap for joy."

There is one catch. Guinea pigs feel pain, but they do not show it, so they may be hurting for a while before anyone notices. The clue is change. A guinea pig that stops eating, goes quiet, or hides more than usual needs a grown-up and a vet quickly. Ines never guesses what is wrong, and she never gives any medicine of her own. Only the vet decides what a sick guinea pig needs.

Ines no longer pictures one fluffy guinea pig of her very own. She pictures two, one bossy and one gentle, sharing a pile of hay in the early morning light, safe in a house with plenty of places to hide. The grasslands are far away, but the old habits came along. Ask a grown-up to look at Peabody Pets with you. You will find it at pet.peabody.kids.

Questions

1. Where do guinea pigs come from?

A. Deserts in Africa

B. Grasslands in the Andes

C. Icy islands

2. Why does hay matter for a guinea pig's teeth?

A. It makes teeth shiny
B. It keeps teeth cold
C. It wears the always-growing teeth down

3. Why does Ines come close from the front and low down?

A. Birds hunt guinea pigs from above, so a hand from above looks like danger
B. She wants the guinea pigs to sleep
C. Guinea pigs cannot see behind them

4. What does prey mean here?

A. An animal that hunts
B. A kind of food
C. An animal that others hunt

5. Why is a change in behavior important?

A. Guinea pigs hide pain, so a change may be the only clue
B. Guinea pigs love change
C. It means they need a new cage

Words to know

grazers: grass eaters
vitamin: needed nutrient
prey: hunted animal
colony: group of groups
vet: animal doctor

Answer key: Why Guinea Pigs Need a Friend

1. B. Grasslands in the Andes
2. C. It wears the always-growing teeth down
3. A. Birds hunt guinea pigs from above, so a hand from above looks like danger
4. C. An animal that others hunt
5. A. Guinea pigs hide pain, so a change may be the only clue