**Guinea Pig**

**What do they look like?**

Guinea pigs are medium-sized rodents, measuring 8-10 inches long and weighing up to 2.5 pounds. Domestic guinea pigs come in a variety of patterns, colors, and hair types. Like other rodents, guinea pigs are equipped with sharp incisors (front teeth) that grow throughout their lifetime which are constantly worn down by the grasses and hay they eat.

**How do they behave?**

Guinea pigs are social animals and form close bonds with each other. Unlike most animals, guinea pigs are neither strictly diurnal nor nocturnal. Instead, they randomly scatter periods of activity with shorter periods of sleep throughout the day and night. Guinea pigs startle easily and will either freeze to avoid being detected or sprint for cover. When excited, guinea pigs often hop in the air repeatedly, known as “popcorning.”

**What’s on the menu?**

Guinea pigs graze on grasses and hay. Most mammalian grass-eaters have long digestive tracts in order to break down food and absorb nutrients. Due to the guinea pigs’ small size, they partake in a behavior known as caecotrophy, eating their own feces. Soft pellets, called caecotrophs, are ingested “directly from the source” to reintroduce vitamins, fiber, and bacteria needed for digestion. At the Zoo, they are fed grass hay, guinea pig pellets, fruits, and vegetables.

**How are they born?**

Guinea pigs can reproduce year round, with births peaking in spring. Sows can deliver up to five litters per year of 1-6 pups. Gestation typically lasts 60-70 days and results in well-developed pups with hair, teeth, claws, and partial eyesight at birth. They are able to walk and eat solid food immediately, although they do continue to suckle from their mother to receive important nutrients and antibodies from her milk.

**How did they get their name?**

Guinea pigs are neither pigs, nor are they from Guinea! Ancestors to modern-day guinea pigs are thought to have been domesticated as early as 5000BC to be raised as food in the Andes Mountains of South America. After the Spanish Entrada into the New World in the 1500 and 1600s, the Spanish brought domestic caviy back to Europe as pets.

“Guinea” refers to the route in which the Spanish sailed back to Europe, passing through the region of Guinea in Africa. They came to be known as “pigs” because of the squealing and squeaking noises they make. The species name given to them, *porcellus*, translates to “little pig.”

**Do wild guinea pigs exist?**

Domestic guinea pigs are a species of their own. Their relatives, other members of the cavy family, exist in the wild but are classified as different species, such as the Brazilian Guinea Pig (*Cavia aperea*), the Shiny Guinea Pig (*Cavia fulgida*), and the Montane Guinea Pig (*Cavia tschudii*). Other close relatives include the maras, capybaras, and kerodons of South America.