

**WELFARE GUIDANCE FOR THE PROPER CARE OF CAVIES  
(Guinea Pigs)  
PRODUCED JOINTLY BY NCC/SCC/BCC**

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# 1. Introduction

This Code of Practice outlines the welfare needs of cavies. Its purpose is to provide general guidelines on the standards of accommodation, management and care appropriate to the keeping, breeding and exhibition of cavies. The Code is based on both the experiences of established cavy breeders and fanciers and on current scientific knowledge. It must be noted that practices once considered acceptable are now being reassessed and modified according to new knowledge and changing attitudes.

A person in charge of cavies has a legal responsibility under the Animal Welfare Act (2006) to ensure that each animal receives appropriate care.

## 2. Responsible Ownership

Since humans can alter or control an animal's environment, animal welfare includes the concept that people have duties and responsibilities towards animals. The greater the level of interference with, or control of, an animal's environment, the greater is the responsibility.

Responsible ownership means looking after the physical and emotional needs of animals and includes adult supervision of children who have cavies as pets. It is necessary to take into account the cavies' interaction with the human carers and its potential life span, which for cavies is up to 8 years but averages 4 to 5 years.

To ensure the welfare of cavies they must not be allowed to escape from the owner's control. Cavies are unlikely to survive away from domestic care.

For most small animals, identification is difficult; however microchipping is available and may be appropriate in some circumstances.

Responsible ownership includes the provision of suitable care, under adult supervision, at all times, including during holiday periods or other absences of the owner.

## 3. Environment

Cavies are very adaptable animals and will thrive in a variety of situations including as free-ranging house pets, in a cage within the house, or in an outdoor enclosure or a weather proof hutch in the garden.

An environment meeting the cavies' needs must include protection from rain, wind, direct sunlight, extremes of temperature and predators. All cavies should have an adequate exercise area. Isolation in an area without windows, ventilation or contact with humans or other cavies is very harmful to a cavy's well-being.

### 3.1 Housing

Care must be taken to ensure that the accommodation:

- is escape proof;
- is predator proof;
- excludes vermin which may be attracted to cavy food;
- provides adequate protection from heat and cold;
- is exposed to natural light but protected from strong direct sunlight in summer
- provides continuous access to water;
- provides adequate ventilation so that condensation does not become a problem
- is safe from fumes and vapours (e.g. car exhausts, chemicals, ammonia from guinea pig urine);
- is easily cleaned;
- is safe for the occupants i.e. has no sharp projections, and does not have a wire mesh floor through which feet and legs may be damaged; and
- provides opportunities for sufficient exercise.

Young cavies are more active than adults, and this will need to be allowed for in planning their environment.

### 3.2 Cavies in Indoor Cages

Most breeders and exhibitors choose to keep their cavies in purpose-built blocks of cages in a shed or outbuilding.

Cages should be designed to prevent the escape of cavies as this could result in fighting or unwanted litters.

A cage housing a single cavy or pair of cavies should be a minimum of 3 square feet and of a height of at least 15 inches. An additional square foot should be allowed for each additional adult cavy in the cage. These should be seen as the minimum sizes.

A suitable cage design incorporates a litter board across the front of each cage. This contains the bedding within the cage and reduces the risk, particularly with young or nervous cavies, of falling from the cage.

### **3.3 Cavies in Outdoor Hutches**

Outdoor hutches should be of robust, weatherproof construction. The hutch should be raised off the ground to prevent rising damp. Hutches should be protected from the prevailing wind and midday sun.

There should be a sleeping/shelter area within the hutch, of not more than one third of the total cage space. It should be of adequate size such that all the cavies in the hutch may take shelter at the same time. It should be kept clean and dry, and should provide protection from the weather and offer security if the animal is frightened. Insulation of the area may be needed to prevent extremes of temperature.

The floor of the hutch should be of solid construction, not wire mesh – some movable outdoor hutches have open bottoms to allow grazing on grassed areas, see below outdoor runs.

The hutch, including any door fixings, should be secure from predators.

The wire used on the door should be of strong galvanised mesh, as foxes can break wire netting. Mesh should be of an appropriate gauge to exclude vermin.

A good overhang of the hutch roof will reduce dampness to the sides and rear of the hutch and limit the ingress of rain at the front.

During the colder months additional protection from the elements should be provided. This may take the form of hutch covers or by moving the hutches to a suitable outbuilding or sheltered area.

### **3.4 Access to Outdoor Runs**

Cavies benefit from access to a run for exercise on fine days. This needs to be of solid construction and covered with strong galvanised mesh on the top and sides. The bottom of the run should not be wired as the cavies' feet will be injured by walking on wire mesh. The run should be secured to the ground if there is any possibility of dogs, foxes or other predators gaining access to the cavies.

- The top must be enclosed and protection should be provided from the prevailing wind, rain and sun.
- A box to hide in and provide shelter is desirable
- Pipes or platforms to climb on as well as other enrichment devices will add interest to the cavies' environment.
- Suitable dimensions for an outdoor enclosure are 2 metres long, 1 metre wide and 1 metre high.

### **3.5 Bedding Materials**

Bedding materials should consist of a layer of absorbent material such as good quality soft white wood shavings and soft meadow hay. Shredded paper or synthetic fleece fabric can also be used in place of shavings. Other products based on hemp are available.

The chosen bedding should be dust free / dust extracted to avoid respiratory problems. Care should be taken that the bedding material has not been treated with chemicals, for example, those used to prevent horses from eating their bedding, for these may be harmful to a cavy.

### **3.6 Cleaning**

Cavies are clean animals, but their accommodation, food and water containers require regular cleaning.

Cavies can develop skin, particularly foot, problems from damp or unsuitable cage flooring and bedding. Urine, in particular, causes scalding of the skin and any damp litter, bedding or floor materials must be removed.

To maintain the cavies' comfort and health and your enjoyment of your pets, regular cleaning of the environment is necessary and involves the following:

- their bedding to be topped up each day
- litter should be changed weekly or as soon as it becomes noticeably damp;
- food and water bottles must be cleaned weekly and rinsed well if disinfectants or detergents are used
- uneaten green food should be removed daily.

### **3.7 Cold Conditions**

Cavies cope well in cold weather but do not tolerate damp. However, they require abundant clean, dry bedding materials, particularly in winter. The sleeping compartment may need to be insulated in extreme conditions.

In winter it is important to maintain adequate ventilation of sheds or outbuildings to avoid build up of humidity leading to condensation.

### **3.8 Hot Conditions**

Cavies are extremely prone to heat stress. Accommodation for cavies must not be placed in direct sunlight as this can lead to overheating.

If temperatures are likely to exceed 26°C then further precautions to cool the accommodation need to be taken, such as:

- accommodation should be moved to shaded areas of the garden
- use air conditioning or a fan in the shed / outbuilding if available;
- wet cloth or sacking draped over the cage. The edge of the cloth should sit in a bucket of water;
- regular sprinkling of the cloth or sacking;
- provide frozen plastic water bottles (sealed) within the bedding

In hot, still summer weather, where air circulation is low, humidity in the shed can increase. Particular attention should be paid to regular cleaning of cages to prevent the build up of ammonia from urine. Hay should be given regularly in small quantities as excess bedding may further reduce air circulation in the cages.

## 4. Nutrition

Cavies are herbivores and require a balanced diet high in digestible fibre

- Hay or grass should form the bulk of the diet.
- Sudden changes in diet should be avoided.
- Good quality hay must always be available
- Fresh greens and root vegetables e.g. carrots, should be given daily.
- Food should be given in a heavy dish to prevent spillage
- The need for vitamin C may be met by feeding fresh vegetables, a proprietary guinea pig feed and/or vitamin C supplements.
- Cavies may eat selectively (i.e. eating only parts of the mix) when fed a mixed concentrate. A plain pelleted feed removes the opportunity for selective feeding.
- Clean water should be available at all times.
- For this purpose bottles are preferred to bowls as these may be spilled or become contaminated with bedding or droppings.
- Bottles should be cleaned regularly to avoid build-up of algae.
- Feed should be stored in vermin proof containers.

## 5. Behaviour

Cavies are timid and will be easily disturbed by sudden noise or movement. Cavies will very rarely bite and then only under provocation, for example if in pain.

### 5.1 Natural Behaviour of cavies

Cavies display a wide range of behaviours including foraging, hiding and burrowing in bedding. The cavies' environment should enable them to display these behaviours.

### 5.2 Companionship

Cavies are gregarious by nature and benefit from being kept in pairs or groups, especially if they are without human contact during the day. Cavies need the company of their own species; the traditional practice of keeping rabbits (or other small livestock) and cavies together is not recommended.

Unless intended for breeding purposes, cavies housed together should be of the same sex or one should be neutered.

### **5.3 Territorial behaviour**

Adult cavies, both boars and sows, may exhibit territorial behaviour. New cavies should be introduced on neutral territory, for example, a freshly cleaned cage or exercise run.

Adult boars may become aggressive towards other boars. Fighting may lead to distress and injury. Fighting is usually preceded by chattering of teeth. However, boars may often accept the company of a newly weaned boar. Alternatively, a boar may be castrated to enable him to live with a group of sows.

Castration will prevent unwanted pregnancy and excess babies, but will not improve the temperament of boars or reduce fighting.

If fighting continues, the provision of an individual 'hidey' for each cavy may help to alleviate this; but separation of the animals concerned is greatly to be preferred.

### **5.4 Handling**

Cavies can become very tame if handled calmly and correctly.

Children should be allowed to handle cavies only under close adult supervision. Very young children should be seated on the floor whilst handling cavies to reduce the risk of the cavy falling.

A cavy should be lifted gently by placing one hand underneath to support the whole the body of the cavy.

A cavy should be carried with one hand underneath the body of the cavy and the other hand resting on the cavy's shoulders. The cavy should be carried close to the body; children may feel more confident carrying the cavy against their chest whilst supporting the weight of the cavy with both hands.

No more than one cavy should be carried at a time.

## 6. Health Care

Veterinary advice should be obtained if a cavy appears to be ill or in pain and the cause is not clear, or if initial first aid treatment is not effective. The owner should be registered with a local veterinary practice to ensure that care is available in an emergency.

Each cavy should be observed at least once daily to monitor its health. The person observing the cavies should note whether each animal:

- is eating normally;
- is drinking normally;
- is urinating and defecating normally;
- is expressing usual inquisitive behaviour;
- is able to move about freely; and
- has a normal coat.

In general cavies are healthy animals and provided they are suitably housed and fed they will get very little trouble in the way of illness. In common with any other pet they suffer from minor ailments which as part of good animal husbandry require prompt treatment by their carer. Routine first aid is certainly a major part of good husbandry. The common conditions encountered that the cavy keeper should attend to without delay are:-

- Skin parasites (in particular lice and mites) – preparations are available from veterinary suppliers for prevention and treatment of minor infestations of both these parasites. Some skin infestations such as fungal infections especially in the region of the face are more complex to treat and more expert advice should be sought.
- Eye injuries – it is common for cavies to be poked in the eye with hay or for hay or for fibrous materials (commonly hayseeds) to become embedded in the eye or below the eyelids. If the injury is not too severe any offending material may be gently removed and a soothing eye ointment applied until healing is complete.
- Overgrown toe nails – should be clipped leaving at least 2 mm's of dead nail covering the "pink" living nail structure. Owners should be very careful clipping dark or black nails where it is more difficult to see the "quick" or living material.
- Overgrown or broken teeth – the front teeth of cavies should be regularly checked – two upper and two lower incisors (front teeth) should be equal and approximately ½ cm in length, if they deviate from this they should be clipped to restore this balance. A cavy's teeth will re grow very quickly (within days) – in line with many herbivores they have constantly growing teeth to counter the constant wear and tear.

- Torn ears and cuts through fighting – after introducing new cavies to groups these may be encountered – in most cases washing and keeping clean with a dilute salt solution or a mild antiseptic solution will be enough to aid healing though of course the original cause must be attended to promptly.
- Abscesses – these occasionally occur and may well burst; treatment is as with cuts the owner must ensure any purulent material is efficiently cleaned away and disposed of.
- Ruttling – upper or lower respiratory noise occasionally made by guinea pigs may be just a nervous symptom that remains with a cavy for life or may be the first sign of an acute lung infection which may be more serious – veterinary advice should be sought.
- Compaction of the rectum – seen in older males, hormonally related – males with this problem should be cleaned every few days to restore normality. As long as problem is routinely attended to problem can be managed for years.
- Diarrhoea or scouring – usually dietary but may be a symptom of infection – if mild to be treated with standard diarrhoea preparations and original cause to be found and removed. Cavies may deteriorate very quickly with problems such as this; veterinary intervention should be sooner rather than later.

This list is not exhaustive and if at all unsure or certainly in the case of more serious problems further advice should be immediately sought from the veterinary authorities. Common problems involving dystocia (difficulty giving birth), bladder and urinary problems (problems with water works), etc more expert veterinary advice should be sought immediately.

It is the responsibility of the carer to ensure that any new cavy introduced to the stud, group or colony is free of contagious diseases and parasites.

A period of quarantine is desirable for any new cavies introduced into a stud or new home.

Cavies showing signs of a contagious disease should be isolated immediately. If it is necessary to quarantine one or more cavies, this should take place in a separate room or building away from the healthy cavies. The daily care of healthy cavies should be attended to before those in quarantine. Strict rules of hygiene should be observed; clothing should be changed before further contact with the healthy cavies.

## 7. Transporting Cavies

Cavies are prone to heat stroke and should not be transported in temperatures above 26°C unless air conditioning is available in the vehicle.

Cardboard boxes may get hotter than properly constructed carriers, which should have wire mesh or slats for ventilation. A cat basket is a suitable container.

If transporting more than one cavy at a time in warm weather, it is better to transport each animal in its own compartment of the carrier, even if they normally live together; they will remain cooler if travelling alone.

- Carrying boxes should be of a suitable size, construction and ventilation.
- The size of the compartment within the carrying box should allow for the cavy to turn around.
- Carrying boxes should contain a suitable bedding material and hay. Boxes should not be packed in the vehicle in a manner which compromises ventilation.
- Cavies should not be left in an unattended vehicle.
- On a long journey cavies should be checked at regular intervals, especially in hot weather.
- Cavies should not travel in the boot of a saloon car.

Water bottles are unsuitable for use when travelling. On longer journeys fruit or vegetables with high moisture content should be given.

It is inadvisable to place food bowls or other heavy unsecured items in travelling boxes, as these may cause injury in the event of an accident or sharp deceleration.

'Cavy Trains' (where large numbers of cavies are transported to multiple destinations by a third party, generally for financial reward) are to be discouraged.

## **8. Exhibiting Cavies**

Cavies suffer no harm from being exhibited from time to time, so long as the following guidelines are followed.

Cavies should be in good health and free from injuries or skin parasites. Pregnant cavies should not be exhibited.

A cavy should not be exhibited when there is suspicion of infectious disease in the caviary, even if the individual cavy appears to be well.

Cavies should be of sufficient age (at least 3 months) and maturity. To reduce stress it is essential that the cavy has been handled regularly prior to being shown.

Cavies in show pens should be provided with a suitable bedding material, hay and a source of water. This may be a water bottle or fresh vegetables with high moisture content.

The National Cavy Club has published guidelines for disease prevention at shows and these should be followed.

## **9. Breeding Cavies**

### **9.1 Responsible Breeding**

To reduce the number of cavies for which homes cannot be found, and to help ensure healthy offspring, breeding should be left to responsible breeders. Breeders are responsible for finding suitable homes for all progeny produced by their animals.

### **9.2 Selection of Breeding Stock**

A responsible breeder has clear aims in mind in his / her breeding programme and selects breeding stock with the intention of producing animals meeting the standard of excellence of the chosen breed.

Before embarking on such a breeding programme, the guidance of the relevant specialist breed club should be sought.

All specialist clubs are obliged to advise their members not to select for breeding traits which are detrimental to a cavy's health

As well as any objectives specific to the breed, all breeding stock should be selected for good size, general health and absence of physical defects.

### **9.3 Care of Pregnant Sows**

Sows used for breeding should be a minimum of 5 months of age, well grown and of appropriate size for the breed. For most breeds this should be around 700 grams.

It is inadvisable to breed from a sow for the first time when she is over the age of twelve months. The fibrous cartilage joining the pubic bones becomes less flexible with advancing age and may make it more difficult for the baby to pass through the pelvic opening. Complications may then result in the need for a caesarean section or even euthanasia.

Pregnant sows can suffer from a fatal condition called toxæmia. Any situation which may cause undue stress to a pregnant sow can precipitate the condition and must be avoided. Examples of such situations include travelling, being exposed to extremes of temperature, being deprived of food or water, change in companions and loud or sudden noise. Cavies which carry too much body fat should not be used for breeding. Handling of pregnant sows should be kept to a minimum.

Pregnant or nursing sows require a diet adequate in protein, vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium.

Adequate periods of rest should be allowed between litters, as dictated by the age and condition of the sow.

#### **9.4 Care of Young**

Cavies have strong maternal instincts and usually make good mothers. If the babies do not appear to be thriving or have not been observed suckling, you should seek advice on supplementary feeding.

Baby cavies can be weaned at 4 weeks and moved to new homes at 8 weeks, provided that they

- appear to be fit, healthy and free from any signs of illness
- have gained sufficient body weight. A minimum weight of 400g is recommended.
- are properly weaned, eating solid food and able to drink from a water bottle.

Young boars become sexually active at an early age, and they should be removed from their mother and female siblings by the age of 4 weeks to prevent the production of accidental litters.

#### **9.5 Finding homes for young cavies**

Owners are responsible for finding suitable homes for all babies produced by their cavies.

Breeding of exhibition cavies is, first and foremost, a hobby, not a business venture. Whilst breeders might hope to recoup some of their costs through the sale of baby cavies, this should never be at the expense of good standards of welfare.

If the new owner is inexperienced in the care of cavies, clear instructions, preferably in the form of a printed sheet, should be given, including advice on:

- diet;
- handling;
- parasite control;
- grooming;
- housing;
- general health care
- nail trimming.

The breeder should

- be satisfied that the new owner is over sixteen years of age or has the permission of a parent or guardian who agrees to provide for the welfare needs of the cavy
- be satisfied that the new owner has all made the necessary provision for housing and feeding the cavy
- provide a sample of the cavy's usual feed and information on where it may be obtained. Some breeders may use feedstuffs, purchased in bulk, which may be unavailable in pet stores; advice should be given on alternative brands of feed.
- provide contact details

Unless specifically agreed with the purchaser, cavies should not be pregnant when sold.

Where a cavy has particular breed characteristics that could lead to welfare issues, this should be discussed with the new owner, e.g. trimming of longhaired cavies or breeding cavies of any variety with Dalmation or Roan coat markings

A visit to a breeder's shed should be seen as an opportunity for the breeder to promote and demonstrate good standards of care.