Fleas - an itchy business!

Dog and cat owners are fully aware of the need to regularly treat their pets for fleas to prevent infestations, but do guinea pigs get fleas, how are they treated, and should guinea pigs be given regular flea treatment?

Can guinea pigs get fleas?

Guinea pigs can get fleas, but it’s generally less commonly seen than dogs and cats, possibly because guinea pigs don’t readily mix with other animals as much as dogs and cats do.

If you keep your guinea pig in a hutch and get cats or other animals coming into your garden then they are potential carriers of fleas, which can be passed onto your
guinea pig.

Guinea pigs that are kept in the house may also contract fleas if they come into contact with other animals in the household.

**What are the common symptoms of a flea infestation?**

As with infestations in dogs and cats, guinea pigs will exhibit similar symptoms. Your guinea pig may scratch excessively and even make themselves bleed with the excessive scratching and bald or thinning patches of fur may become apparent.

Commonly, you will notice black flecks in the fur (this may not be so obvious in dark coloured guinea pigs); this is flea dirt (droppings). Since the flea dirt is dried blood, if you brush some of the flecks onto a wet piece of cotton wool, they will turn red; this is diagnostic of fleas on your guinea pig.

Unless the infestation is advanced, you are unlikely to see any live fleas on your guinea pig.

**What type of fleas are guinea pigs prone to?**

Dog (*Ctenocephalides canis*) and cat fleas (*Ctenocephalides felis*) are found on pet guinea pigs, but fleas are much less common than mites on guinea pigs.

**Are fleas dangerous?**

Generally speaking, fleas themselves are not life-threatening. However, guinea pigs are small animals with much less blood volume than a cat or dog, so if your guinea pig has a heavy flea infestation, it's possible for them to become anemic through blood loss, which can be dangerous.
The itching and self-inflicted trauma from flea bites may also be particularly severe in some cases.

Can I treat my guinea pig for fleas?

Yes, fleas need to be treated as soon as possible as they lay larvae on the carpet and other material items, and infestation can occur very quickly.

A variety of products are available to help prevent and treat guinea pigs infested with fleas. Currently there are no licensed products available for guinea pigs to treat fleas, but products containing imidacloprid, selamectin or lufenuron are effective and deemed safe to use on rabbits, so your veterinarian may suggest using these on your guinea pig. All of these products will be used off license; so you will need to discuss the potential benefits and risks with your veterinarian first, and they may ask you to sign a consent form, stating that you have understood this.

Many flea powders are available, but they may contain ingredients dangerous for guinea pigs. DO NOT assume that these products are safe just because they are available from your local pet shop. Herbal treatment should also be treated with caution as some natural products contain chemicals such as pyrethrin, which can be lethal for guinea pigs.

Flea dips (baths) and shampoos aren't very effective and do little to get rid of infestations since the eggs of the adult fleas will hatch out after the guinea pig has been treated, and the infestation will continue. The ingredients in the dip/shampoo may also be toxic for guinea pigs, and these treatments can be stressful for your guinea pig, and probably you as well!

A flea comb can be used, but as a single approach this probably won't solve the problem completely.

Flea collars should NOT be used. As well as being stressful and a potential danger due to strangulation, they often contain chemicals that are dangerous to guinea pigs so are not recommended.

Ensure you clean out your guinea pigs hutch and run thoroughly and if your guinea pig lives inside, you will need to treat the house with a specially designed spray.
which is safe to use around guinea pigs. You will also need to wash all their bedding, toys, etc. Regular vacuuming or steam cleaning will also help reduce the risk of flea infestation.

**BE WARNED**

Some common flea treatments for cats and dogs but must NOT be used on guinea pigs.

Products containing fipronil, commonly known as Frontline™, must NEVER be used on rabbits. Deaths have been reported after using this product on rabbits, so it is likely that guinea pigs may suffer similar effects.

**Multi-guinea pig households**

If one guinea pig in the household is infested with fleas, then it is best to treat all guinea pigs in the household, to ensure that the infestation is dealt with.

**Guinea pigs and other animals**

Prevention is the best approach to flea problems.

It is important to keep up to date with flea treatment protocols for dogs and cats within the same household, even if your guinea pig lives outside, since fleas jump! Over-the-counter remedies purchased from pet shops and supermarkets are often ineffective, so it's best to speak to your veterinarian who will be able to advise you and prescribe you a suitable flea treatment for your dog and cat. Remember to treat your house regularly with a specially designed spray, which again you can purchase from your veterinarian.

**Should I implement a flea treatment programme?**

If you have dogs and cats and they are kept up to date with their preventative flea treatment, then you shouldn’t need to regularly treat your guinea pig for fleas. However, if you don’t implement this, have wildlife and/or cats coming into your garden, then it may be best to speak to your veterinarian about a flea treatment programme suitable for your guinea pig.