Pet Partners®

Rabbit and Guinea Pig Behavior Packet

Version 2
December 2016

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About this Packet

This packet is intended to provide both general as well as evaluation-specific information for both Pet Partners prospective/existing handlers and Pet Partners team evaluators. Some sections include reference to which audience may be particularly interested in that material; however. The entire contents are useful to both audiences.

Rabbit Introduction and Behavior

General Considerations and Information about the Species at Large

Rabbits are a prey species, which means that many movements may signal danger. Holding or squeezing them can feel life-threatening. They often respond to environmental cues with freeze/flight. A freeze can last for a very long time.

They are also herbivores, which means that they eat more frequently, are motivated differently, and have very sensitive GI tracts. Among herbivores, rabbits may be considered the most capable of causing serious injury. They are strong kickers and may learn to bite. Rabbits can be territorial and, like cats, often mark their territory by rubbing up on objects.

Rabbits live in family groups with well-developed relationship structures. Dominant rabbits bump or nip subordinates to elicit grooming.

Rabbits can overheat easily – which is signaled by flushed ears. Overheated rabbits must be removed from the situation and cooled off.

Rabbit teeth grow throughout life and can be worn down by chewing (sticks, pine cones, wicker/wood toys).

Well socialized rabbits are outgoing and affectionate. They can become very bonded to their humans.

Rabbit Behavior Considerations

**Displacement Signals**

- Grooming
- Yawning
- Licking lips
- Digging

**Fear/Stress Signals**

- Shedding (different from normal shedding stages during course of a year)
- Will produce pellets
Become very tense
- Eyes enlarge and whites are visible
- Body tenses with tail up
- Ears are laid back tightly
- Growling or squeaking
- Pushes hands away
- Lack of vitality or interest
- Flinches when touched
- Breathing becomes rapid
- Inside of ear becomes bright pink to red
- Screaming - sounds like a child crying/screaming (Very serious pain sign)

**Relaxed/Interested Signals**
- Purring
- Dropping their head and/or flattening their head or entire body are signs they want to be petted
- Nipping or nudging can be a sign of affection. However, nipping should be treated as a bite and the animal scored “Not Appropriate”

## Rabbit Supplement to Policies & Procedures for Evaluators

- If third eyelid appears, **stop test**
- Rabbits may be evaluated in a basket/carrier or in the handler’s arms with a blanket or towel underneath
- Rabbits must wear a harness and lead during the evaluation and when visiting
- Be sure rabbits that sit very still are **not** frozen and fearful - they should be looking around or sniffing table or floor
- Pick up rabbits while supporting the hindquarters
- Set rabbits down hindquarters first
- Rabbits may flatten during the crowd test - this is a good sign
- While the evaluation includes a “Restraining Hug” – certain breeds of rabbits may be too small to hug in a typical way, especially because the animal may not be picked up to hug it. Therefore, the hug may look a bit more like a constriction of the body with your hands or forearms. The exercise is intended to gauge how the handler will guide interactions as well as the animal’s response to restraint – even if it doesn’t look like the kind of hug an evaluator might give a canine. Many rabbits, however, are large enough to receive a “true” hug. The evaluator must use their discretion in determining how to deliver the hug in a way that assesses aptitude while also accounting for animal size.
Guinea Pig Introduction and Behavior

General Considerations and Information about the Species at Large

Cavy (pronounced “cave-eee”) is the correct term; Guinea pig is a misnomer, but it is the most commonly used term for this animal. Cavies depend on their sense of hearing and sight. They have a good sense of smell, but smells are not as important to them as sound and sight.

Cavies can be trained to sit quietly and relaxed in baskets or towels. While Cavies can be potty trained, due to size and diet they may have accidents. Multiple layers of towelettes can be used to remove droppings from carrier. They visit wearing a harness and lead.

Cavies come in a variety of coat textures - long, short, fluffy, coarse and wiry. A different coat texture should not be considered a sign of ill health. Cavies tend to have sensitive skin. This should be a consideration when it comes to facility-provided barriers (i.e. towels that may be bleached or disinfected with harsh chemicals). Handlers may wish to protect their guinea pig’s skin by preventing their animal from touching the hospital-provided barrier. Some handlers place a blanket over the towel and then the carrier/basket (and then wash that blanket at home, since it touched the irritants). Others place the carrier/basket directly on the towel and just take care that the towel does not touch the guinea pig – and then the carrier/basket is wiped down after the visit to remove irritants.

Cavies are a prey species. Like rabbit, they are also herbivores. As stated above with rabbits, Cavies believe many movements signal danger; holding or squeezing them can feel life-threatening. Cavies may respond to perceived dangers by freeze/flight. They eat frequently and are motivated differently than other species.

Rabbit Behavior Considerations

Displacement Signals

- Grooming
- Yawning
- Licking lips
- Digging

Fear/Stress/Aggression Signals

- Raises up with stiff legs
- Rattles, hisses, or clacks teeth
- Shows teeth with mouth wide open
- Lifts the head at right angles
- Squeals, squeaks or screams loudly
- Draws in legs, presses against basket for protection
- May lie motionless on back, playing dead
Chattering or grinding teeth
- Whites of eyes show all around eye (eyes may look “bugged out”)
- Frozen or huddling in place
- Excessive shedding
- Quickly shoving head into corner of basket or under handler’s arm in response to approach or petting

**Relaxed/Interested Signals**
- Gurgling, murmuring noises, or soft little squeaks (contentment)
- Relaxed body
- Stretching (comfort and relaxation)
- Lying down on belly or side
- Eyes alert
- May extend head and/or raise head up to investigate
- May sit with nose wiggling while investigating
- Leaping and cavorting
- May lick good friends (including people)
- May give direct eye contact while investigating

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**Guinea Pig Supplement to Policies & Procedures for Evaluators**

- Cavies must be evaluated in the handler’s arms, a basket or a carrier
- Cavies must wear a harness and lead during the evaluation and when visiting
- “Burrowing” or sitting with head in blanket or corner of basket is not a sign of stress if animal is willing to investigate surroundings.
- Approaches should be made while talking to the animal to announce your arrival so as not to startle
- While the evaluation includes a “Restraining Hug” – guinea pigs may be too small to hug in a typical way, especially because the animal may not be picked up to hug it. Therefore, the hug may look a bit more like a gentle (soft/slight, so as to be mindful of the animal’s size and sensitivity to threats) constriction of the body with your hands or forearms. The exercise is intended to gauge how the handler will guide interactions as well as the animal’s response to restraint – even if it doesn’t look like the kind of hug an evaluator might give a canine.
- Cavies may not visit in pouches but they may visit in what is often called a “cozy” and they can visit in a bed. Pouches are considered a place for a cavy to hide and, as such, we do not want clients placing hands into a hiding place. A cozy or bed provides more ample opening at the top – hence, it is not a hiding place, even if its smaller size makes the animal feel more secure.
Example of a Cozy and a Bed – the cozy is white, the bed is red.

Rabbit and Guinea Pig Evaluation Overview

The Pet Partners Evaluation Overview – Rabbits & Guinea Pigs is a resource developed for handlers to increase understanding of the evaluation exercises. Evaluators are encouraged to review it prior to evaluating a rabbit or guinea pig.