



Guinea Pig Helpline Factsheet

“Alternative” Beddings for Guinea Pigs

‘Alternative beddings’ (material or fabric bedding) is the collective term for the material-based beddings you wouldn’t normally associate with guinea pigs. There are two main beddings that fit into this classification – fleece and Vetbed. Information on the specific uses of each is given later in this Factsheet, but first, the pros and cons of using an alternative bedding:

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reusable, one set of bedding can last many years; • Highly cost effective long-term, not spending money regularly on bedding; • Readily available online and in shops; • Can be cut to size; • Does not harbour parasites or fungal spores when washed correctly; • Kind to piggies feet, skin, coat and respiratory tracts; • Ideal for elderly guinea pigs; • Surface remains dry – urine and moisture wick down through the bedding, thus encouraging optimum hygiene; • Excellent for post-operative recovery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need regular access to a washing machine and tumble dryer/airer; • Debris just as hay and hair may stick to the bedding; • Initial outlay may be expensive depending on which bedding is chosen; • <u>Must</u> include an “underbedding” – something absorbent underneath the bedding to absorb fluids; • Bedding may shrink with very long term use, so when first fitting to size of cage must allow at least an additional 3 inches on all sides; • Fleece is not a weighty bedding, some find it difficult to spot clean (remove poops daily).

It is important to remember that alternative beddings can only be used for piggies that live **indoors**, or those living in a specially designed temperature controlled shed; alternative beddings are not advised for use in outdoor hutches.

Prior to the first use, run your new fleece, Vetbed and towels through the washing machine *at least* 2-3 times. Brand new unwashed beddings don’t work with moisture as effectively as bedding that has been “broken in” by washing. ***Never use any fabric softener/conditioner when washing beddings as this reduces the bedding’s ability to wick urine.***

You should cut the bedding to size *after* these initial washes, and always allow an additional three inches of bedding (minimum) on all sides to accommodate any shrinkage associated with long term use. It is recommended that you buy at least 2 or 3 full sets of your bedding so that you can immediately replace the old bedding with fresh.

Underbeddings

Underbeddings are important to use with alternative beddings because fleece and Vetbed are not absorbent. As moisture is wicked through the fleece and down through the Vetbed to its base, the moisture needs to be absorbed by something at this point to prevent any pooling of urine and to allow more moisture to wick through, keeping the surface continually dry. Favoured underbeddings are typically bath towels/sheets, or mattress “incontinence pads” for humans.

Feeding Hay

Guinea pigs still need free access to ample amounts of fresh, loose stranded hay as part of their dietary requirements. It is inevitable that hay will be tracked across the fleece, but it need not be spread to the point there is a layer of hay over the entire fleece. Using correx or large litter trays, create a feeding zone within the cage, a section that is not made up with fleece or Vetbed, but with newspaper, hay and – if desired – a traditional bedding. A small lip (no higher than two inches) on the correx or litter tray will help minimise hay being dragged back into the fleece/Vetbed area.



Preparing to Wash

There will be poops, hair and usually hay on the surface of the fleece or Vetbed, all of which need removing prior to washing in the machine. You could choose to vacuum the debris up prior to removing the bedding from the cage, and/or you might choose to fold everything up inside the fleece to Vetbed and shake everything off outside before washing.

When shaking outside, ensure you give the bedding a thorough shake, beat it all over with the back of a dustpan brush to loosen things a little more, and brush it all over to get rid of the worst of the waste. It won't be completely clear, but the aim is to at least get all the loose debris and all larger pieces (strands of hay and all the poops) off.

While many owners wash their fleece, Vetbed and underbeddings in the machine as normal, some others choose instead to place all their piggie washing inside a pillowcase, duvet cover or specially-designed "wash bag" to protect their machine from any remaining debris on the bedding.

Alternative Beddings & Illnesses

Alternative beddings are vastly better than traditional beddings when a guinea pig is ill, whatever illness the pig is suffering. Fleece and Vetbed wick urine through to the underbedding leave the surface dry, they are soft on the pigs body, can be washed and replaced very frequently at no extra cost, allow for monitoring of particular symptoms (e.g. blood in urine, or leakage of a wound), and do not act as skin or respiratory irritants.

If a guinea pig with either a parasitic or fungal problem is bedded on fleece or Vetbed, simply soak the bedding and underbedding for one hour in a **Virkon** solution (<http://www.sphsupplies.co.uk/categories.php?category=Disinfectants/Virkon>) followed by a wash in the machine as usual.

Individual Bedding Reviews

Beddings are reviewed by: a) cost and availability, and b) washing.

Fleece

a) Availability:

You can buy fleece from many different types of outlets – fabric stores, art and craft shops, homeware departments, even supermarkets. Search for fleece throws or blankets, or if buying from a fabric store or buying online, choose to buy fleece by the metre according to how much you require. Fleece will not readily be cut to size, but it is very easy to trim to the exact size and shape you need for your cages.

There are a few different fleece types to choose from. The smooth and flat **polar** fleece is the type usually recommended and used. **Anti-pill** is another very popular one; it does not bobble after heavy use and years of washing, unlike polar fleece which can bobble a few years down the line. **Sherpa** fleece tends to be best used inside cosies and cuddlecups rather than as the bedding - it's surface tends to be more like Vetbed in texture, bobbly, soft and a touch fluffier than polar and anti-pill.

Cost:

Depending on where you buy your fleece from, and how much is required, it can cost as little as £10 to acquire two cage sets for a 2x4ft cage.

b) Washing Advice:

Wash all fleece at 60°C for thorough cleaning. Use a biological or non-biological detergent. Avoid any strongly scented detergents. Never use fabric softener/conditioner.

Vetbed

a) Availability:

Vetbed is widely available in pet shops locally, on the high street, and online. It is not marketed as a bedding for small animals, instead it is advertised for use with dogs, but it is a very popular bedding for guinea pigs too.

Petlife International market the original Vetbed. Over the years a few Vetbed alternatives have come onto the market, especially online; in my experience these Vetbed pieces should work just as effectively as the original provided they have the stiff backing layer.

Cost:

Vetbed costs are typically much higher than fleece. For two cage sets to fit a 2x4ft cage, expect to pay no less than £40, often more. However, Vetbed is known to last as long as a decade, so still proves to be a highly cost effective bedding.

b) Washing Advice:

The Original Vetbed (marketed by Petlife International) can be washed at 90°C. For all other Vetbed materials, and for routine washing, 60°C is appropriate for a thorough cleaning. Use a biological or non-biological detergent. Avoid any strongly scented detergents. Never use fabric softener/conditioner.

Opinions on Alternative Beddings

Reading the behaviour of guinea pigs should be the rule as far as human opinion goes. The large majority of guinea pigs love alternative beddings: popcorning and doing 'zoomies' is a very common sight for pigs new to it, and many favour sleeping on fleece bedding or Vetbed, or cosies, when given the choice between that and a traditional bedding.

Hay obviously needs to be given ad lib and it can be given in a way which allows their natural foraging behaviour, as explained earlier in this Factsheet.

Beyond that it is down to your personal situation (cage size, number of piggies, access to your own washing machine and outdoor area, your own time commitments etc.). Things may seem a little tricky to understand in the immediate term, but as soon as you have mastered the routine, it becomes time effective as well as financially cost effective.

