

PET PIGS

By Catherine Love, DVM

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NATURAL HISTORY

Pet pigs are a subspecies of domesticated swine (*Sus scrofa domestica*) that are smaller than standard farm pigs and bred specifically for human companionship. Pet pigs may be referred to as teacup, mini, micro, nano, or pot-bellied pigs but some of these terms can be misleading. In recent years, the popularity of pet pigs has skyrocketed, leading to a variety of breeds and characteristics, but also unscrupulous breeding practices. Pet pigs started gaining popularity in the US in the 1980's with the introduction of the Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, and that popularity has only continued. Originally, pot-bellied pigs were bred in Southeast Asia for meat production. When pot-bellied pigs were introduced to North America, they were intended for zoos, but they quickly captured the interest of private owners. Crossbreeding and selecting for pet-friendly characteristics resulted in a more desirable housepet.

While the term "mini pig" is often used to describe any (relatively) small, domestic pet pig, it is not a distinct breed. Similarly, the term "pot-bellied pig" also refers to a type of pig sharing certain characteristics rather than a single breed. Micro, mini, nano, etc are also not distinctive breeds and unfortunately often do not reflect the actual adult size of the animal. The vast majority of pet pigs in the US are a mix of various breeds, but there are a few distinct breeds including Julianas, Kunekunes, and more.



CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIOR

Pigs are incredibly intelligent and curious animals. This makes them easy and fun to train, but it also means they need a lot of stimulation to keep them from becoming bored and destructive. Your house will need to be "pig proofed", similar to toddler or puppy proofing to prevent your pig from getting into trouble. Pigs will chew on and eat objects and food that they are not supposed to, leading to serious illness or toxin ingestion. Thanks to their highly developed sense of smell, they can easily find table scraps or garbage, and are smart enough to figure out how to open cabinets. A pig's nose is also used for rooting around in the dirt to forage for food. This is an instinctive behavior that pigs need to be able to practice in a safe environment, or else it may be redirected onto a home's flooring. Many natural behaviors can become an annoyance if a pig is not given a proper outlet.

They are also very vocal and produce a variety of grunts, snorts, squeals, and very loud screams. Pigs are not quiet pets, and communicate heavily through vocalizations. Their screams are loud enough to cause hearing damage, and they are not shy about screaming when they are upset or distressed. This often includes handling, restraining, or trying to pick up a pig, as the majority of pigs dislike having their feet lifted off the ground. Many pet pigs enjoy belly rubs and may cuddle with their owners, but not all want to be pet or snuggled. Pigs can bite quite hard when they are feeling distressed, and may do so to indicate their displeasure. They are emotionally complex animals and tend to bond strongly with one or more people in the household, but may not enjoy the company of strangers.

Pigs are prey animals, and tend to run away when feeling threatened. They are social and live in herds in the wild, so they do best with at least one other pig in the home. Some pigs and dogs can get along, but they should be carefully introduced and always supervised to prevent injury. A squealing, running pig may elicit a prey response even in a familiar dog. It is normal for pigs to become pushy or challenging

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CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIOR

toward other animals or humans in the home. Pigs have a very strict hierarchy and learn very quickly who they can push around, including their human “herd”. This may include nudging, shoving, nipping, and posturing. Undesirable behavior, including aggression, is a common reason pet pigs are surrendered to rescues, though many of these behaviors may be normal for a pig. A pet pig is a huge commitment and requires a very specific lifestyle. They can be very headstrong, and grow large and strong enough that it is near impossible to physically make them do something they don’t want to do. It can be difficult to transport a pig, both for veterinary and leisure purposes.

ADULT SIZE

70-150 lbs is typical for a healthy adult, but some may reach 200 lbs. Despite being advertised as such, there is no breed that will remain 20-30 lbs at a healthy adult weight. Growth continues until around 4 years of age, though puberty may begin as early as 2-4 months.

LIFESPAN

12-20 years with proper care.



BUYER BEWARE!

One of the biggest problems with pet pigs is the expectation that they will stay small. Although pet pigs are significantly smaller than many other swine species, they can still grow quite large and powerful. While the term “mini pig” is often used as an umbrella term, words like micro, teacup, pocket, micro-mini, or nano are typically more of a marketing term than an actual descriptor. Often, pigs represented in this way have been inbred, underfed, or have their ages misrepresented to make them appear smaller than is actually healthy for them. When looking to purchase a pet pig, these kinds of buzzwords are red flags.

HOUSING

Pigs can be sensitive to both extreme heat and cold, and should always have access to weather proof shelter. Temperatures from 60-75F are most comfortable, and they can easily overheat when temperatures exceed 85F since they are unable to sweat. Pigs kept outdoors during warmer months should have access to a mud wallow to help keep themselves cool and to provide enrichment. Plenty of shade should also be available, and fans may be needed in very hot climates. It is recommended for pet pigs to have frequent outdoor access. If a pig is not housed outside, they should be given safe outdoor access for at least several hours a day in an enclosed pen. A minimum of 8x15ft per pig is recommended, though larger is better to encourage activity and exploration. Fencing needs to be strong, and buried at least 1ft below ground to prevent the pig from uprooting it with their snout. Hog panels, chain link, or sturdy wood are recommended. Fencing also needs to be tall and sturdy enough to keep predators out.

Outdoor shelters should be clean and dry, and insulated against temperature extremes. At least 6 square feet per pig is recommended. The flooring should be non-slip and provide good traction. Additional heating sources such as heat lamps should be used carefully to prevent burns or fires. A thick layer of nesting material such as hay or aspen shavings (avoid cedar and pine as these can be respiratory irritants) are also needed, and should be

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HOUSING

replaced daily. Fleece blankets may be used but should be monitored carefully to prevent ripping and ingestion.

Pet pigs may be housed inside or given indoor access, but keeping a pig strictly indoors is not recommended. Pigs with outdoor access tend to have less problems with hoof overgrowth and are given more opportunities for enrichment and exercise. If a pig is brought indoors, they should only be allowed to access pig proofed areas. Remove any breakable objects, electrical cords, cleaners, medications, and food from the pig's reach. A large, comfortable bed should be provided, particularly for older pigs who commonly have joint pain and arthritis. Pet pigs are very smart and can be trained to use a litter pan or potty outside like a dog. They tend to naturally choose to eliminate in one area away from food and water.

FOOD AND WATER

Fresh water should always be provided, and water bowls should be weighted or secured into the ground to prevent tipping. Pigs are particularly prone to salt toxicity when deprived of water. Pigs can be messy eaters and drinkers and may knock over food or water bowls.

Pigs are true omnivores and will eat just about anything. Wild pigs mostly forage on grasses, roots, fruits, and invertebrates, but are very opportunistic and will not hesitate to eat just about anything they can get in their mouths. They are prone to obesity, which can lead to many health issues. It is important to feed a pet pig/mini pig specific diet, and not a production/farm pig diet. Diets designed for production or grower pigs are meant for rapid growth and not long term health. The majority (60-80%) of a pet pig's diet should be an age appropriate, nutritionally complete commercial diet. Recommended diets include Mazuri, Manna Pro, Sharp's, and Heartland. The remainder of the diet should be leafy greens, non-starchy vegetables, and roughage (grass or grass hay, not alfalfa). Ideally, pigs should be able to graze outside on fresh grass. Not all pigs will eat hay, but

FOOD AND WATER

it can still provide enrichment opportunities for rooting and foraging. Treats should be limited to no more than 5% of the diet. Appropriate treats include cheerios, unsalted and unbuttered popcorn, mini pig specific treats, berries, watermelon, and oatmeal.

Up to about 4 months of age, a higher protein (~20%) growth diet should be fed. After this point, the protein level can be decreased (~16%) and the fiber level increased. Pigs reach approximately ½ their adult body weight around 1-1.5 years of age, and growth starts to slow down. Around this time, depending on body condition and activity levels, the pig should be switched to an adult maintenance food with around 12-14% protein, 2-5% fat, and 12-15% fiber. Senior pigs do best on a lower protein (~12%) diet, and may need their food moistened.

Feeding recommendations vary, but in general it is recommended to feed around 1-2% of the pig's body weight (in kilograms) of pellets per day, or approximately 1 cup of food per 50 lbs of body weight for a healthy adult. Pigs under 4 months old need higher amounts due to their rapid growth. 1.5-3% of body weight (in kilograms), or 2-4 cups of pellets per 50 lbs is often recommended. The food bag may also provide baseline amounts, but every animal should have their diet adjusted to account for activity and additional foods. It is recommended to divide feedings into at least 2x daily, and to encourage foraging rather than feeding from a bowl.

Chocolate, table scraps, processed food, starches (corn, potatoes), citrus, cat or dog food, fruits with pits, avocado, and high sodium foods should not be fed.



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TRAINING

Pigs are extremely intelligent animals, comparable to or even exceeding dogs. This makes them very trainable, but it also makes them prone to forming bad habits. Everyone in the household needs to be on the same page with the rules and how to enforce them, or else the pig will learn who they can bully to get their way. The pig should be never hit or physically punished, but firm boundaries should be established and enforced.

Since pigs are generally very food motivated, positive reinforcement with treats can be easily employed to encourage desirable behaviors. It is recommended to start training at a young age. Getting them used to handling, grooming, transportation, and medical procedures will greatly reduce stress on the pig and the owner in the future. Pigs should become accustomed to being touched around the ears, eyes, nose, and feet (including picking their feet up). They should also be introduced to a harness and a crate to make transport easier, and grooming and bathing to get them used to skin care. Older pigs may need a ramp to get up and down stairs, and ramps are also very helpful for loading and unloading in the car. Getting the pig used to all of these things while they are young increases the likelihood that they will be cooperative when they are older. All training should be based on positive reinforcement and not forcing the pig into stressful situations. Be sure to not overfeed treats as this can cause excess weight gain.

GROOMING

Contrary to popular belief, pigs are generally clean animals. They do wallow in mud pits to cool themselves off, but will only lay in their waste if they have no other options to cool themselves or if there is no space to move away. They generally don't need baths unless they are noticeably dirty, and their skin can actually be dried out by too much bathing. A gentle, oatmeal based shampoo is recommended for bathing. It is also recommended to routinely clean a pig's ears with a pet

GROOMING

safe ear flush, as they do tend to build up a lot of debris in their ears. A warm, damp washcloth can also be used to wipe away the natural crusts that accumulate around a pig's eye.

Dry skin is a common problem for pet pigs. Providing an omega fatty acid and/or vitamin E supplement may help, but feeding a nutritionally complete diet is the most important. Regular brushing with a soft-bristle brush can also help remove dead hair and skin. A gentle, unscented moisturizer can also be applied to a pig's skin to help with flakiness. Lighter skinned pigs may need sunscreen applied while outdoors, especially on the back of the ears and on the nose.

ENRICHMENT AND EXERCISE

Wild pigs spend much of their time (at least 40% of their day) foraging for food, and should be encouraged to do so in captivity. Pigs with outdoor access can root around in the grass, and their food can also be spread around for them to forage for. Puzzle feeders meant for dogs are also a great option for pigs, especially those that are indoors or don't have regular access to a large open space to forage/root. Pigs can be harness trained and taken for walks and may also enjoy clicker training like a dog. Sandboxes or rooting boxes filled with materials like newspaper, play pit balls, straw/hay, or similar items are a favorite of many pigs. Horse toys or large dog toys may be appropriate for pigs, and many enjoy toys that make noise. A mud pit or plastic kid's pool can also be provided in the warmer months to allow wallowing. Treats frozen in ice, hanging toys/treats, cardboard boxes, tires, bowling balls or soccer balls, leather ropes, or scratchers/brushes attached to a wall or post may also be appreciated by a pig. Avoid painted objects, or anything made out of string or wood. Toys need to be heavy and durable. It is important to encourage pigs to move around and exercise for at least a few hours every day.

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ZOONOSIS

Sarcoptic mange, or scabies, is a common condition in pet pigs. It causes itchiness, hair loss, and changes to the skin and is caused by a highly contagious mite. Sarcoptic mange can occasionally be spread to humans. Rabies has been reported in pigs, but there is currently no approved rabies vaccine for pet pigs in the US. Erysipelas AKA diamond skin disease can cause skin lesions in both pigs and humans, which is why it is important to vaccinate pet pigs regularly for this condition. Swine flu is not the same virus as the normally circulating influenza that affects humans, but occasionally people can become infected. Humans can also potentially infect pet pigs as well. The best way to prevent disease transmission between people and pigs is to wash your hands thoroughly after touching them or cleaning their pens/cages.

HEALTH

Pet pigs should be examined by a veterinarian every 6-12 months. Vaccine recommendations may vary by area, but generally include erysipelas, tetanus, and leptospirosis. A fecal examination should be performed yearly as well, particularly for pigs kept outside. Pigs may also need hoof trims to keep their hooves from becoming overgrown. This is especially true for animals that live mainly indoors, as they generally do not wear their hooves down as much. Hoof trims may need to be done every 6-12 months. Male pigs will also continue to grow elongated canines (tusks) that may need yearly trimming to prevent them from getting caught or from injuring humans/other animals. Spaying and neutering between 2-6 months of age (once over 15lbs) is recommended to reduce the risk of reproductive tumors and it may also help reduce or prevent some unwanted behaviors.

Obesity is a very common issue in pet pigs. This can lead to many health issues as a pig ages, particularly arthritis. Keeping a pet pig at a healthy body condition, providing non-slip flooring, and keeping up on hoof care can reduce the risk of arthritis and joint pain. A healthy pig's

HEALTH

hips and spine should be palpable with firm pressure. If the hips and spine are easily visible and palpable with minimal pressure, the animal is underweight. If the hips and spine cannot be felt at all, they are overweight. Obese pigs may also have folds of skin that cover their eyes, a belly that drags on the ground, or a tailhead buried within folds of fat.

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