

Guinea Pigs: Gastrointestinal (GI), Oral and Intestinal Disease

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Scurvy (Vitamin C Deficiency)

Although the absolute vitamin C requirement of guinea pigs is widely known, clinical and subclinical scurvy is still very common. This can be attributed to the fact that under certain conditions (e.g. too much heat or humidity) vitamin C loses its effectiveness, so owners often feed their pet a vitamin C enriched diet that has lost its potency.

Since collagen is the main structure affected by vitamin C deficiency, overt signs of disease may include swollen or painful joints, hemorrhage and loosening of the teeth. Subclinical signs may mimic those of any other illness, or exacerbate existing disease. Therefore, treatment with injectable vitamin C @ 50 mg/kg with continued oral supplementation at home at the same dose, is the recommended treatment. Response to therapy is often the method by which this condition is tentatively confirmed.

Malocclusion

Signs of dental disease include decreased appetite, drooling and grinding of the teeth. Prior to this degree of affectation, you may notice that the pig is preferentially eating only certain foods, or chewing on one side of its mouth (tilting its head). Factors specific to guinea pigs include:

1. Scurvy is a common underlying reason for malocclusion. The amount of tooth overgrowth showing above the gum lines may be minimal, but the angulation of the teeth due to the effects of vitamin C deficiency may be severe. Guinea pigs with scurvy may have their tongues trapped beneath the lower molars as these

molars overgrow medially. The tongue of these pigs can still protrude from the mouth, but movement is hindered and painful due to the overlying molars.

2. Guinea pigs also have a smaller oral cavity, with more redundant buccal mucosa than do rabbits, making access to the molars without causing trauma to the oral cavity more difficult.

3. The green sludge in the oral cavity provides a visual barrier to evaluation of the teeth.

Gastrointestinal Disease

A common misconception is that lack of stool production is due to constipation. Generally, it actually represents a decrease or absence of food intake. Enemas should not be given to guinea pigs unless radiographic evidence of constipation is documented (which will be a rare occurrence).

Overgrowth of harmful intestinal bacteria can occur in guinea pigs for the same reasons as it does in rabbits. Changes in diet or decreased food consumption and inappropriate antibiotic administration are the primary offenders. Treatment follows the protocols outlined for rabbits, including analgesia (buprenorphine), rehydration, simethicone for gaseous distention, metoclopramide, vitamin C supplementation, syringe feeding of appropriate product, such as Oxbow Critical Care for herbivores, and antibiotic therapy as indicated. Although not a definitive indicator of the gastric flora, a fecal gram stain may aid in the selection of antibiotics.

For more information on this subject, speak to the veterinarian who is treating your pet.