

Vitamin C and Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs are one of only two types of animals, along with humans and other primates in that they are missing an enzyme that is necessary for the body to make Vitamin C. Therefore, they require supplemental Vitamin C in their diet in order to prevent scorbutin (a potentially fatal disease, if not immediately treated by a veterinarian, caused by Vitamin C deficiency).

Although guinea pig pellets usually have added Vitamin C, it only remains active for about 90 days after the pellets are made, unless it is a stabilized form. Unfortunately most brands do not carry expiration dates on their pellets. Therefore, only purchase high quality pellets (Oxbow, Mazuri) whose expiration dates are clearly marked on the bag. Storage at room temperature and high humidity can rapidly destroy Vitamin C; therefore supplementation of fresh fruits and vegetables are recommended.

- Fruits and vegetables should not exceed 5-10% of a guinea pig's daily diet.
- Foods that contain high levels of Vitamin C include: leafy greens- such as parsley and chicory; red and green peppers, tomatoes, dandelion greens (no pesticides, fertilizer, or herbicides), kiwi, and oranges.
- A 50 mg tablet daily is adequate for a healthy guinea pig.
- Use products for guinea pigs that only contain Vitamin C (Oxbow chewable tablets).
- Supplements placed in water are not recommended as they break down rapidly and immediately begin to grow bacteria in the water.
- Avoid multi-vitamin products as they may result in an overdose of other vitamins.
- Avoid pediatric formulations; many of these contain a lethal level of iron.

Signs of a Vitamin C deficiency in guinea pigs can develop quite rapidly (within days to weeks) if they are being fed a deficient diet. These signs include:

- Loss of appetite
- Lethargy
- Weight loss
- Swollen and painful joints and ribs; lameness
- Poor bone and teeth development
- Nasal/eye discharge
- Bleeding gums and hemorrhages under the skin and into the joints

If the Vitamin C deficiency is identified before the guinea pig becomes too ill, it can be corrected and the guinea pig will possibly recover. Typically since guinea pigs with lowered vitamin C levels tend to eat less. It is probable they will require parenteral supplementation from a veterinarian, and often require other medical therapy.

Please contact Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital immediately if you observe your guinea pig having any of the previous symptoms or a change in behavior, appetite, physical appearance, or stools.

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