

Why Is This Guinea Pig Sick?

A once-healthy guinea pig develops multiple signs of illness that perplex her veterinarian.

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Q: Our new guinea pig was perfectly fine when we got her. She ran around her cage and everything like the other two that we have. One day, she started to roll and tilt her head. We took her to the vet immediately, and she was diagnosed with a possible middle ear infection. She had discharge coming from her ear. We were given ear drops, pet tinic and antibiotics to give to her two times daily.

About a week or so later, our guinea pig began to cough, sneeze and lose weight (despite my guinea pig having a healthy appetite). We took her back to the vet and he did X-rays. He was unable to get a blood sample from my guinea pig, but he did culture her poop for parasites. No parasites were found, but my guinea pig's lungs showed the beginnings of an Upper Respiratory Infection. We got more medications, another antibiotic (baytril), cough medicine, and an allergy medication just in case she was having allergies.

After a week, we took my guinea pig back to the vet. She still wasn't gaining weight, and her right eye had begun to cloud over and appeared to possibly have blood behind the iris. The vet examined her eyes and said she is now losing her vision. He said that due to my guinea pig's low body weight, he would not be able to get a good blood sample to find out anything more about what is going on with her.

Currently my pig eats fine and walks a little slow, sometimes in circles. She doesn't have the head tilt. She drinks plenty of water and makes normal guinea pig noises. The vet suspected an auto-immune disease. We also researched online and noticed she could be having seizures. At times my guinea pig tilts her head straight back, which is occasionally followed by a squeal.

This vet feels that he can't do anything more for my guinea pig without putting her through more traumatic and expensive testing. She doesn't seem like she is suffering at all, but we would like to know what is wrong with her. Our other two guinea pigs are totally fine. They all live together.

A: These are all very unusual signs for a guinea pig. It sounds as though she did have a middle or inner ear infection. There is a connection via nerves from the middle ear directly to the brain. It could be that an infection traveled from the middle ear straight to the brain, resulting in some of the other signs you have seen. It might be that your doctor is correct — that the only thing at this point that can help with a diagnosis are blood tests and radiographs. Although rarely performed on guinea pigs, an MRI could help lead to an answer.

Before you go through any of these tests, get a second opinion. Bring all of your previously used medications with you for the examination. Have the names and dosage of the drugs that you gave your guinea pig with you for the exam so the veterinarian can determine if your guinea pig might be exhibiting a reaction to them.