

Common Guinea Pig Health Issues

Find out what health issues guinea pigs may experience.

By Audrey Pavia

Posted: March 31, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

©Isabelle Francais/BowTie Inc.

A healthy guinea pig's eyes are bright and clear.

Respiratory Problems

A variety of viruses and bacteria can cause respiratory ailments in guinea pigs. A guinea pig suffering from a respiratory problem may experience sneezing, lethargy, discharge from the nose and/or eyes, loss of appetite and difficulty breathing.

You can help prevent respiratory infections in guinea pigs by keeping the cage clean, keeping the cage in a draft-free room, and quarantining any new guinea pigs. If you suspect your guinea pig is suffering from a respiratory problem, contact a veterinarian right away.

Lumps

Lumps on a guinea pig's body can be caused by a number of different problems, including an abscess, tumor, cyst or fatty lipomas.

Abscesses are bacterial infections usually resulting from a wound or injury. Abscesses are round and often have a thick discharge. Tumors can be benign or cancerous, and cysts are often sebaceous and located just below the skin. Fatty lipomas are usually benign and consist of fat that has been deposited under the skin.

It's difficult to prevent a guinea pig from developing any of these types of lumps, although early detection is important to treatment. Examine your guinea pig every day, and take it to a veterinarian immediately for a diagnosis if you find a lump on its body.

Dental Problems

The teeth of guinea pigs grow continuously and must be worn down by gnawing. If the teeth do not wear down normally, because of the way the guinea pig's mouth has developed, the small animal has a condition called malocclusion. This is usually a genetic problem and occurs because the teeth are not aligned.

Guinea pigs with overly long teeth, repeated infections in the mouth, ulcerations on the lips or tongue, and difficulty eating may be suffering from malocclusion.

You can't prevent malocclusion, but you can manage it by having your small pet's teeth trimmed regularly by a veterinarian.

Gastrointestinal Tract Problems

Guinea pigs can become constipated easily if not fed the right diet. They can also develop diarrhea. Both of these conditions are dangerous and can be life-threatening if not treated right away.

Guinea pigs suffering from constipation may strain to defecate. You may also notice a lack of feces in the cage, a distended abdomen or lethargy.

Diarrhea shows up as loose or runny stools, and messiness underneath the tail.

To help prevent constipation, make sure your guinea pig gets fresh green vegetables every day, and provide access to clean, fresh water. To prevent diarrhea, keep its cage clean and introduce new foods gradually. Don't feed your guinea pig anything containing processed sugar as this can interfere with normal gastrointestinal function. Keep fruit treats to a minimum.

Take your guinea pig to the veterinarian if it shows any signs of constipation or diarrhea. Your vet needs to diagnose and treat these problems right away.

Skin Problems

Many skin problems in guinea pigs are caused by an external fungus. This infection usually starts on the face and spreads

to other parts of the body, although it may be present in more than one place at a time. You'll see missing areas of hair on a guinea pig's body, sometimes covered with scales or sores. The spots may be itchy, so you'll see your guinea pig scratching them repeatedly.

Guinea pigs can also develop skin problems from parasites such as lice and mites. Lice are tiny, wingless insects that live in a guinea pig's hair. Signs are scratching and loss of hair. Mites can also cause a loss of hair. Some guinea pigs infested with mites will run wildly in circles.

To help prevent skin problems in guinea pigs, keep humidity levels low in the animal's environment. Keep your small pet's cage clean, and don't overcrowd guinea pigs in cages.

If you suspect your guinea pig has a skin problem, contact an exotics veterinarian immediately for a diagnosis and treatment.

Foot Sores

Guinea pigs can develop sore hocks from living on a wire-only cage bottom. Their hind legs become red and swollen on the bottoms, and they lose some of their hair. If the problem is bad enough, the guinea pig may not want to move around because of the pain. If you suspect that your guinea pig is foot sore, take it to the vet right away. The vet may give you antibiotic ointment to put on its legs, and will suggest that you change your cage flooring.

To prevent hock sores, provide your guinea pig with solid flooring. If your small pet lives in an outdoor hutch, make sure at least 1/3 of the cage floor is solid to offer relief from the wire.

Heatstroke

Guinea pigs can develop heatstroke easily in hot weather, especially if left in a car or in direct sunlight. Signs of heatstroke include laying in a stretched out posture, panting, rapid breathing and drooling. If your guinea pig is overheated, get it out of the hot environment and put a cold, wet towel around its body. You can also try bathing your guinea pig in cool water (not cold). Take your small pet to a veterinarian immediately.

To prevent heatstroke, keep your guinea pig's cage out of direct sunlight. Situate the cage away from radiators and other heat sources. Never leave your guinea pig in the car on warm days.

Eye Problems

Guinea pigs sometimes develop eye problems as a result of another condition, such as a respiratory infection, diabetes, teeth problems or dehydration. Eye problems caused by these problems can include signs like crusty or watery discharge, protruding or receding eyes, or cloudy eyes.

Guinea pigs can also develop corneal ulcers as a result of injury to the eye. The eye may appear swollen and watery. The guinea pig may squint or paw at the eye. The eye may also become cloudy.

Guinea pigs can also develop cataracts, either as a result of diabetes, old age or a genetic tendency toward the disease.

Some guinea pigs are born blind, while others can go blind as a result of old age. Blind guinea pigs are usually able to live relatively normal lives.

To help prevent eye problems in your guinea pig, keep its cage clean and provide a quality diet. If you suspect a guinea pig is under the weather, take it to an exotics veterinarian right away. If a small pet's eyes seem irritated or swollen, don't wait to take it to a vet.