All Creatures Rescue & Sanctuary Guinea Pig Emergency Guide

If you suspect that your guinea pig sick, the best course of action is always to seek veterinary care. Because guinea pigs are prey animals, they have evolved to hide their symptoms as long as possible in order to survive onslaught by carnivores.

**Symptoms of Concern**
The following are the most common symptoms of concern for guinea pigs. This is not a comprehensive guide, but rather an overview to the most common symptoms.

*Anorexia (lack of appetite)* – not eating is a sign of serious disease. Guinea pigs have a digestive tract which is designed to process food nearly constantly (hence their need for access to unlimited hay). A cavy which is not eating has a digestive tract which is not moving. This is a serious problem.

Depending on other symptoms, your vet will want to do diagnostics to help determine the cause of anorexia, which may include x-rays, ultrasounds, or urinalysis.

Handfeeding is recommended until you can get your pet in to see your vet. Handfeeding will not fix the health problems of your cavy, but it can help keep them alive until your vet can. (A guide to handfeeding is included in this handout)

*Labored Breathing* – any time your guinea pig’s breathing becomes strained or loud, it is a cause for a vet visit. This can include hooting, “crackly” breathing, or sneezing and coughing. The most common cause of breathing problems are respiratory infections. They are almost always fatal if left untreated. Allergies can occasionally cause similar problems, but allergies in guinea pigs are rare, and respiratory infections are common. Breathing problems frequently occur in association with nasal and eye discharge as well.

Respiratory infections are usually treated with an antibiotic, which should be given concurrently with a probiotic to help minimize the effect on the digestive tract. Your vet may also recommend doing a culture on your guinea pig, in order to pick the best antibiotic for their particular respiratory infection. Attached with this packet is a copy of Guinealynx’s “Dangerous Medications” guide. Many antibiotics are dangerous to guinea pigs because of their digestive tract, so make sure you check any antibiotic given by your vet against this list.

Handfeeding will also frequently be required since your sick guinea pig will generally also have a loss of appetite.

*Blood in pee/Squeaking While Peeing or Pooping* – Both symptoms are serious, and should be seen by a vet. They are typically caused by urinary tract infections or bladder stones.

In order to diagnose your guinea pig, your vet will typically run a urinalysis to look for blood and bacteria, and perform an x-ray to make sure there are no bladder stones. In the case of a urinary tract infection, antibiotics are the most common treatment (again, check your antibiotics carefully against the Guinealynx “Dangerous Medications” sheet). In the case of bladder stones, surgery is the most common option. Bladder stones can be especially dangerous if left untreated because they can lodge in the urethra and cause the death of your guinea pig.

*Diarrhea* – Diarrhea is serious in guinea pigs because of their small size, and can have a plethora of causes. One of the most common is overfeeding of vegetables. If the diarrhea is mild, and the stools are only slightly loose, you may withhold vegetables from your guinea pig for a day while keeping a close eye on your guinea pig for other signs of illness. If the stools do not improve and become more solid very quickly, the vet should still be visited. Other common causes of diarrhea include antibiotic intolerance (in the case of treatments for other illnesses), as well as a variety of bacteria which may need to be treated.

Your vet will generally do a “fecal culture” to rule out these bacteria.
In the meantime (and concurrent with other treatment), guinea pigs with diarrhea should be aggressively syringed with Pedialyte to prevent dehydration. Depending on the severity of the diarrhea, your vet may also want to give IV fluids to rehydrate your guinea pig.

Weight Loss – Weight loss in guinea pigs is a serious problem, though it can be a sign of many symptoms. Whenever a guinea pig is in pain, is having dental problems, doesn’t feel well, or is having other medical problems, they almost always lose their appetite. Because of this, weighing your guinea pig weekly with a digital scale is an invaluable tool in making sure your piggie stays healthy.

Guinea pigs generally gain small amounts of weight throughout their life, so a downward trend in weight (excepting in the cases of treatment for severe obesity) should be considered a serious problem.

Per Guinealynx, a fluctuation of 1-2 oz either up or down is generally not of concern. Most guinea pigs will “gain” 1-2 ounces after vegetable time, only to “lose” this as they digest it. A weight loss of 3 or more ounces is a definite flag for vet care. Additionally, a slow but steady loss, even of 1-2 ounces at the time, is a sign of illness.

A healthy adult guinea pig weighs, on average, between 2 and 3 pounds. A “healthy” weight is entirely in relation to their body size! That is why weighing is so important.

Handfeeding is also important in dealing with weight loss, as it accompanies so many guinea pig health problems. Handfeeding should never be substituted for veterinary consultation, but used only in conjunction with your vet’s recommendations for treatment.

Eye or Nasal Discharge – Eye and nasal discharge frequently accompany upper respiratory infections, so it’s vital that if any discharge is noticed that a vet be consulted. In addition, if a guinea pig has an eye injury, the eye will frequently “weep” and can appear very wet. Eye injuries can become serious very quickly, and it’s important to seek medical care as soon as possible to preserve your guinea pig’s sight.

Please note, guinea pigs make a white, milky fluid in the corner of their eyes that they use for grooming. This is not considered a medical emergency. However, in the case of very sick guinea pigs, they will frequently not bother grooming themselves (they are very lethargic), and so if you see your guinea pig sitting with this fluid in their eyes for a long period of time, make sure to carefully monitor their weight and other vital signs.

Nasal discharge may be cultured by a vet in order to pick the most effective antibiotic against respiratory infections. In the case of eye injury, the vet will frequently do a “stain” of your guinea pig’s eye with special chemicals in order to see abrasions and/or cuts. These are very commonly treated with antibiotic and/or steroid drops in order to aid healing.

Lethargy/Puffed Up Coat/Facing The Wall – Another rather broad symptom is lethargy in guinea pigs. Lethargic behavior can vary wildly from guinea pig to guinea pig, so it’s important to be aware of your guinea pig’s habits. Frequently, lethargic pigs will have a very “puffed” appearance, and will not stretch out or lie down. They will also frequently crowd themselves into a corner as an instinctive throwback to their days in the wild.

Lethargy is common with many, many illnesses, and generally also appears with weight loss. It is important to visit your vet if your guinea pig appears lethargic or “puffed”.

Drooling/Physical Problems Eating – if your guinea pig appears to be excited to eat, but is drooling or having actual physical difficulty ingesting food, it’s typically the sign of a dental problem.

The teeth of guinea pigs are designed to grow constantly. This is another reason why hay is so important to their diet – the motion of grinding up hay while eating keeps these teeth worn down evenly. Occasionally, their teeth may grow out unevenly. This can be because of poor diet (lacking in hay), or a genetic predisposition towards dental problems.
Although the incisors are the easiest to see, and many vets will attempt to simply trim them if they are overgrown to fix the problem, the incisors very rarely overgrow on their own. If the incisors have overgrown, make sure your vet examines the molars to check for spurs (or sharp points) or molar overgrowth. Molars much more commonly come out of alignment (or malocclude) and will then cause the incisors not to meet correctly and overgrow.

You may also notice that your pig has broken off a front tooth. This is not uncommon, and is not generally a serious problem. Because their teeth grow constantly at a slow rate, most guinea pigs will regrow a broken tooth within approximately 2 weeks. During this time, you may need to chop up their vegetables a little more finely and/or handfeed them in order to help them out until their tooth can grow back in.

Monitor the site of the break to make sure that the tooth is growing in properly. If it shows signs of growing back in crooked, call your vet for an appointment. Occasionally a tooth may break into the gumline and cause abscesses and other problems, so make sure to check the site frequently and weigh your pig daily for any weight changes which may signal more serious problems.

Dry Skin/Open Sores/Hair Loss – By far, the most common cause of hair loss in guinea pigs are mange mites. They are species specific to guinea pigs, so they will not infest your other pets, or your human family! People with especially sensitive skin may itch when coming into contact with the mites, however.

Your vet will generally prescribe one of two treatments for mites for your guinea pig – ivermectin or selamectin (brand name Revolution). Ivermectin should be reapplied weekly for at least 3 weeks, although severe infestations may take as many as 5-6 treatments. Revolution should be applied biweekly for at least 2 applications, though with serious infestations may require more treatments. Some vets will wish to do a skin scraping for mites. This is a very ineffective way to diagnose mites, as it relies on being lucky enough to scrape a patch of skin which happens to have a mite. If your guinea pig is scratching and losing hair, treat for mites!

Extremely severe mites may manifest as seizures. These are EXTREMELY severe cases, and require many months of incubation to occur. A guinea pig having seizures will convulse, scream in pain, and may even flip themselves upside down and writhe back and forth in an attempt to escape from the pain. Many people mistakenly describe this behavior as “scratching their backs”, so make sure if your pig is doing this to seek medical attention immediately.

If your guinea pig has open sores from mites, your vet may also prescribe an antibiotic to prevent your pig from developing abscesses at the sites of open wounds. As always, check the “Dangerous Medications” list to make sure it’s an approved antibiotic.

Occasionally a fungal infection may also cause the same symptoms as mites, though typically with less scratching. Fungal infections tend to occur in smaller, round patches, though they may occur as whole body populations as well. Fungal infections should be confirmed with a culture (typically your vet willpluck a few hairs from the site of the hair loss and send them out to a lab to test) and are treated either with an oral antifungal (such as Lufenuron or Itraconazole) or with a topical skin cream or shampoo (such as Nizoral or Miconazole).

Finally, a pig may lose hair due to scurvy. Scurvy is a lack of vitamin C in your guinea pig’s diet. This is very unlikely to occur if your guinea pig is getting daily fresh vegetables.

Very taut stomach/Swollen Abdomen – If your guinea pig has a very taut, full stomach, and a gentle tapping sounds hollow, it can be a sign of bloat. Many things can cause bloat in guinea pigs, including vegetables such as cabbage which make them produce too much gas, intestinal blockages, congenital defects, and genetic propensity.

If you think your guinea pig has bloat go to the emergency vet immediately. Bloat becomes fatal very quickly. Also do not handfeed a pig who is believed to have bloat. Because the digestive system is blocked, food will only put more strain on the organs, and it is possible for their stomachs and/or intestines to tear if too much pressure is on them.
Constipation/Not Pooping – If your guinea pig is not producing stools, seek vet care immediately. Do not attempt to handfeed a guinea pig that is not producing poops, as it can put too much strain on their digestive system and cause physical damage to their digestive organs.

Tilted Head – head tilt in a previously healthy pig is typically caused by inner ear infections. Vet care should be sought quickly, as untreated ear infections can quickly become dangerous, and the head tilt can become permanent.

Ear infections are typically treated with antibiotics (as always, check the “Dangerous Medications” list).
Susan’s Guide to Handfeeding

Guinea pigs and rabbits share a basic design flaw: a sensitive digestive system that reacts to stress and illness by shutting down (stasis), and which, once shut down, will kill the animal unless restarted.

It is critical that GP and rabbit owners know how to hand feed their animals. Hand feeding (also called syringe feeding or force-feeding) can be the life-or-death difference for an animal who is in stasis. It can also be a useful way to prevent stasis when you have an animal who is unwilling to eat for other reasons (pain, surgical recovery, etc).

Hand feeding can be VERY confusing, scary, and troublesome when you first do it. Later, it’s not so scary, and you find yourself making this huge production to prepare for it, but the feeding itself seems over in seconds.

You might find yourself more comfortable approaching hand feeding if you have specific tips to rely on. Guinea Lynx offers some excellent suggestions, especially with regards to amounts and transitioning back to regular food. But I wanted to offer some slightly more practical tips on the actual act of feeding itself:

Choose your product.
The two best options are Oxbow’s Critical Care (CC), or ground-up pellets (whatever your pet normally eats). I prefer the CC, only because it is MUCH easier to push through the syringe than pellets. The pellets don’t mix perfectly with the water, so the water gets pushed out and you end up with a syringe full of compressed pellet dust. However, on the negative side, some people report that an animal on long term assisted CC feeding will refuse to eat anything else once they’ve gotten addicted to CC. So for practical reasons, I use CC when I just have just one or two feedings to do (like nursing an animal post-surgery), but I do use a mix of CC and pellets, or alternate between them on different feedings, if I’ve got someone whose being fed 4x-daily for a week or more.

If you do choose to grind pellets, a cheap coffee grinder works wonders.

Preparing the slurry.
You’ll probably need to feed about 20 mL per feeding per kg of body weight, repeated between 2 and 4 times per day. Your vet will give you explicit instructions based on your pet’s weight. An animal who is eating a little on her own and is just getting a supplement to jump start her gut, probably only needs 1-2 feeds per day. So I prepare about 20 mL at a time, and throw away what I don’t use. A heaping 1/2 tablespoon of CC makes about 30 mL depending how much water you add.

You’ll need a spoon (for stirring and putting the slurry into the syringe), a small bowl (a shallow teacup works well because of the handle), and a 10 mL syringe.

Prepare the slurry by adding first the powder, then a warmed liquid - not hot, but slightly warm. You can use water, or Pedialyte, or cranberry or orange or apple juice. I typically use water for occasional feedings, Pedialyte for severely ill animals.

The directions on the CC aren’t very helpful. I think it recommends a 1:3 mix of powder to liquid, but this is usually pretty chunky, still. Too thick, and it’s hard to control when you push it through the syringe. Too wet, and the animal is getting more liquid than nutrition. I like my CC mix to be wet enough to be runny, but still form lumps when I drip a spoonful back into the bowl. Think thinish pancake batter. Brownie batter would be too thick.

When you’ve mixed your slurry, pull the plunger completely out of the syringe and hold the other part upright with your finger covering the pointy hole. Then use the spoon to drip slurry into the butt of the syringe till it’s full, then add the plunger. You’ll get some overflow at both top and bottom, but if you did it right, the syringe will be totally full and ready to go. If you get air bubbles, tapping the side of the syringe will move them upwards and you can expel them.
Set up the feeding station.
I find that I can do this best when the animal is about level with my shoulders, so I typically place the animal on the edge of a bed or table, and I sit on a low stool next to it. Sitting on the floor with the animal on the coffee table or couch might work too. The point is, you want to be able to curl your arm around the animal to help control her movements.

Be SURE you put a towel on the surface under the animal. Possibly several towels. She’s going to complain and fight and slobber and shake her head and everything will be covered in flying CC. I also like to make a little wall of pillows around the towel (covered with more towels) so she can’t get away too easily. And you probably also want a spare towel for wiping up accidents or wiping the syringe on. And don’t wear nice clothing.

Feeding.
If you’re right handed, place the animal facing towards the right and sit facing towards her, turned slightly right yourself. Curl your left arm around her butt so that your left hand can have control of her shoulders and head, but if she backs up she is stopped by your arm and elbow. I typically keep my left hand on her head or back, patting her, unless I need to hold her still - then I keep my hand turned upright - thumb on top of the head, fingers curled around the cheek and under the jaw (hovering but not touching except to exert control if she tries to move). Keep her close to the edge so that she is close to your body, to prevent her from jumping off or turning around that way.

Take the syringe in your right hand and “start” it - get a small bubble of slurry ready on the tip. Approach her mouth from underneath - you want to touch the right corner of the bottom lip, rather than the nose or upper lip, so that the syringe slides behind her incisors - but keep the syringe mostly horizontal and aimed at her left cheek (if she’s facing 3 o’clock, you’re entering at 5 o’clock and aiming at 11 o’clock). Do NOT aim straight down the throat, animals have been known to aspirate on slurry.

Now the unpredictable part starts. She may grab the syringe and start sucking like it’s her favorite vegetable, or she may growl and whine and back up and box you, or she may duck her head and avoid the syringe, or she may bite it and not let go. To avoid all the negative things, you want to try to get in the mouth, push the plunger very gently and just a little, and get out quickly. Don’t try to give too much slurry at once - I give between .5 and 2 mL per jab (a line about 1-2 cm long), depending on the size of the animal, the plunger barely moves. Yes, it takes forever this way, but I once had an animal aspirate and it is a terrible death to witness. If you do it right, you should see her chewing - give her a moment to chew and swallow before you jab her again.

Another reason for the small mouthfuls is that if she gets too much, she’ll just spit it out and then you have an animal covered in brown drool. You can practice making small movements with the plunger to be sure you are able to jab in just the right amount and not too much. If she loves it, you may find she will just slurp it up in huge 5 mL mouthfuls, or even eats it from a spoon. If so, fantastic!

If she’s ducking her head or turning or backing away, you can use your left hand and arm to aim her at 3 o’clock again, but try to do it very gently. It’s hard to explain - you need to not be afraid of forcing her into position, but also don’t want to ACTUALLY force her if you can help it. Two fingers resting lightly on the jaw should be the maximum amount of force you actually need to exert. In between jabs, be sure to pet her head and nose and let her settle down if she’s very agitated.

Let the animal’s manner guide you on when it’s time to stop feeding. If she willingly takes a whole syringe, go ahead and make another one and start that. If she gets 5 mL or so and she starts to slow down and it gets harder and harder to get in there, push her as far as you can, but don’t do another 10 mL. You don’t want to make her hate the feedings, and you can always try again in a few hours.

If she’s eating willingly, it’s important to take advantage of her interest in food to offer her the opportunity to eat on her own. I often take a break between syringes and offer melon, wheatgrass, hay, etc; anything that might tempt her into eating on her own.
One last tip: get a GOOD scale, and weigh your pet both before and after every feeding. A steady pattern of weight loss, despite frequent and successful assisted feeding, indicates that you’re losing the battle. And you cannot see this without actually tracking the weights.