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CARING FOR YOUR GUINEA PIG

HOUSING: Guinea pigs, also called cavies, need a dry draft-free environment. Temperatures of 60-80°F are tolerable with 70°F being ideal. They may be housed in wood or wire cages with solid floors. Avoid wire floors, as feet may become caught and bones broken as the pet tries to free itself. Wire floors also tend to cause sores on the feet. Provide a thick layer of good bedding such as recycled paper, hardwood shavings like aspen (not cedar or pine), fleece, or straw. Cavies may be housed in groups or singly. Intact males should not be housed together, to prevent fighting. Guinea pigs are sociable and enjoyable pets, and often live to be 5-6 ½ years old.

FEEDING: The bulk of the diet should be timothy-based guinea pig pellets (not a seed & fruit mix), and lean grass hay such as timothy or oat hay. Avoid alfalfa pellets except with pregnant or nursing females and babies, who need the extra protein and calcium that alfalfa provides. Pellets may be fed free-choice unless obesity occurs; hay is always fed free choice. Pellets provide balanced nutrition; hay provides roughage essential for intestinal health in cavies. Veggies should be limited to small amounts of leafy greens; these can include leaf lettuce, parsley, cilantro, dandelion, blackberry leaves, & carrot tops. Fresh grasses are safe. Items high in sugars (fruit, baby carrots, tomatoes, corn, etc) or high in protein (seeds, oats, alfalfa) should be avoided, as they easily cause bloat or diarrhea which can be deadly. Avoid greens in the cabbage group (broccoli, cabbage, kale, bok choy, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower) as these may also cause bloating. Guinea pigs also need Vitamin C in their diet daily. Pelleted food should not be relied on for Vitamin C needs, because this vitamin deteriorates rapidly with time and exposure to heat, light and air. The daily MINIMUM Vitamin C requirement is 10 mg per day; pregnant or ill cavies may need 30+ mg daily. Vitamin C additives for water bottles are usually inadequate. Fresh food sources provide some Vit C, but grocery store fruits & vegetables may cause bowel upsets if fed in enough quantity to meet a cavy's vitamin needs. The most reliable way is to use chewable Vitamin C tablets; Oxbow makes 25 mg chewables for cavies; these can be softened with water to improve palatability. Children's vitamin C tablets can be used, but are stronger (break 100 mg tablet into pieces roughly equivalent to 25 mg). Giving more Vit C than necessary isn't a problem, unless the dose is extreme. Fresh water should always be available. Ball bearing bottles are cleaner, and not as easily spilled as bowls. Clean the cage, food and water sources regularly.

COMMON DISEASES:

Vitamin C Deficiency (Scurvy): Signs of scurvy include drooling, weight loss, hair loss or reluctance to move due to painful joints. Therapy is mainly Vitamin C supplementation. Correction of the diet to include daily Vitamin C sources is necessary. Supportive care (fluids, antibiotics, etc) may be needed in very ill patients. This is a common and preventable disease in this species.

Dental Diseases: Guinea pigs have constantly growing teeth, and may develop overgrown front teeth (incisors) or back teeth (molars) for a variety of reasons. Incisor overgrowth may be visible as long tusk-like projections from the mouth. Molar overgrowth (or molar infections) may cause drooling, chin staining, foul odor, and difficulty eating. Treatment of tooth problems often involves trimming the overgrown teeth back to normal length, extracting any infected teeth, correcting any other illness which may be contributing to the problem, and force feeding if the patient cannot eat. Many cases are curable, but some dental problems can be persistent and life threatening. Fasting guinea pigs need immediate care, as they can die from bowel upsets with inadequate roughage intake.

Coccidia: Coccidia are microscopic parasites living in the bowel, and are mostly seen in young cavies. If diarrhea is seen (especially in a young pet) a fecal analysis should be performed. Treatment involves giving sulfa drugs and cleaning up feces to prevent reinfection.

Dysbiosis & Enterotoxemia (Bowel upsets): Intestinal upsets are a major cause of death in pet cavies. Signs may include loss of appetite, diarrhea, and lethargy, but some cavies only show one of these signs. Cavies have sensitive intestines, and almost any stress can cause this disease. Sudden diet changes, sugary treats, parasites, and some antibiotics (especially penicillins) can cause a sudden and often fatal diarrhea or bloat. This is probably due to an upset of the normal bowel bacteria, with overgrowth of harmful bacteria such as Clostridium. Bowel disease is unpredictable; mild cases may have slightly soft stool for days and still survive, but severe cases may develop depression and shock within hours and die before diarrhea develops. Prevention is via feeding a high roughage diet with minimal use of sweet items such as fruit; also minimize high protein items (oats, seeds, nuts, alfalfa). Avoid sudden changes in diet, and restrict veggies to less than 20% of the diet. Avoid veggies in the cabbage family. Treatment of bowel upsets varies with severity, but may include bacterial supplements such as milk-free acidophilus, feeding roughage (force feeding if necessary), intestinal stimulants such as Reglan or Propulsid, antidiarrheals such as Kaopectate or blackberry leaves, and injected fluids with therapy for shock in severe cases. Prompt medical care is essential whenever a cavy is lethargic, or is not eating, or has diarrhea, or feels cold to the touch. Bowel upsets are often curable if caught early.

Ovarian and uterine disease: Reproductive disease is very common in aging female cavies. Their ovaries often become enlarged and cystic, which can cause increased hormone levels. This in turn leads to other pathology such as weight loss, balding, and uterine and mammary cancers. These can be deadly if not detected early. Prevention is easier: ideally spay any cavy who is not going to be a breeding animal. Spayed females tend to live longer and healthier lives.

Lice and Mites: These are common skin parasites. Mites are microscopic, burrow deep in the skin, and when numerous cause intense itching, flaking, and hair loss. Severe cases may develop large scabs or sores due to intense scratching and biting at the skin. Lice are larger than mites, barely visible to the naked eye, and live on the surface, causing mild itching and some hair loss when numerous. Both mites and lice may be present for months or years with minimal signs until their numbers are large. Lice and mites can be killed with oral ivermectin; treat weekly for 8-10 weeks as the eggs persist for long periods. Lime-sulfur dip can also be used but is more labor-intensive; it may be used with ivermectin in severe cases to ease symptoms faster. Cleaning the cage weekly when treating the mites or lice will help reduce reinfestation, but long term environmental treatment is unnecessary, as the parasites die if they are off their host for long. These parasites are species-specific but highly contagious between cavies; use caution when introducing new cavies to an existing group.

Respiratory infection: Signs include sneezing, wheezing, lethargy, nasal or eye discharge, or difficulty breathing. Various bacteria may cause this, including Strep and Bordetella. Dogs, cats and rabbits may carry Bordetella and ideally should not be housed in contact with cavies. Cavies at risk of exposure may be vaccinated twice yearly for Bordetella to prevent infection; the vaccine must be a killed product, as live vaccines may cause illness in cavies.

Head tilt (wry neck, torticollis): This is usually due to internal ear infection, sometimes secondary to a respiratory infection. The cavy usually tilts the head to one side and has a loss of balance, often falling when trying to walk. Strep bacteria are a common cause. Treatment is with antibiotics.

Foot infections (bumblefoot): These are usually caused by improper housing such as wire floors or soiled bedding. Front feet are usually affected. Diarrhea or urinary incontinence may increase soiling and risk of foot problems. Obesity puts more pressure on the feet and may contribute to abrasion of the foot pads. Mild cases have superficial ulcers on the bottoms of one or more feet; a scab may cover the ulcer. Severe cases develop deep swelling and infection of the feet which can be very difficult to cure, requiring multiple surgeries and long term antibiotics. This disease can be life threatening. Prevention is easier than treatment; provide a clean, dry cage with a solid floor and plenty of straw or paper bedding to pad the floor and absorb urine.

Bladder stones (uroliths): Common in cavies over 3 years old, these are calcium stones likely formed due to weakened bladder function. Cavy urine contains much calcium normally, and any retained urine may form stones. This condition is life threatening if a urethral blockage occurs. Treatment includes surgical removal of stones from the bladder, but stones often reoccur repeatedly, so surgery alone is inadequate. A very strict low-calcium diet combined with medications can control this dangerous condition, and usually prevents reoccurrence of the uroliths.