

B i r d & E x o t i c V e t e r i n a r i a n

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TOOTH PROBLEMS IN GUINEA PIGS

1. Why do guinea pigs have dental disease?

Dental disease is one of the most common conditions affecting pet guinea pigs. Guinea pigs' teeth continuously grow throughout their whole life. Guinea pigs need a high fibre diet (including grass and oat hay) to grind down and shape their teeth. Guinea pigs fed mainly on pellets or guinea pig mixes often have dental problems. Most guinea pigs with dental and gum problems also have a Vitamin C deficiency (scurvy).

2. What problems are associated with dental disease?

The lower cheek teeth in guinea pigs are curved inward. When a guinea pig's teeth are not being ground down properly, they will grow towards each other and eventually entrap the tongue. This interferes with the ability to chew and swallow. The front teeth (incisors) often become misshapen too, as a result of this uneven chewing. Without special equipment, cheek teeth are difficult to view and so problems may go undiagnosed until advanced dental disease is present.

3. What symptoms are seen?

Dental disease is often painful, and the first sign seen is often when the guinea pig stops eating certain types of food or any food at all. Weight loss is also commonly seen. They may start producing fewer or smaller droppings. Some will produce excessive saliva (drooling) leading to fur matting under the jaw.

4. How do we diagnose dental disease?

During your guinea pig's health check the vet will use special equipment to examine the back teeth. If dental disease is suspected, x-rays may be taken to confirm the diagnosis and help plan treatment based on which teeth are affected. Guinea pigs may need to be sedated to ensure good quality radiographs are taken and that all the teeth are thoroughly checked.

5. What treatment is involved?

Dental surgery may be required to grind down overgrown teeth. Occasionally, teeth that are damaged beyond repair may need to be removed. In many cases, assisted syringe feeding will be required for 2-8 weeks after the surgery. Most guinea pigs will also need ongoing pain relief and antibiotics. Dental disease is serious and once it occurs it is often only possible to manage the disease, not completely cure it. Often, guinea pigs with dental disease will require multiple dentals over the next 3-12 months.

6. How do I prevent dental disease in my guinea pig?

Annual checkups are crucial. In problem guinea pigs more frequent checkups are necessary. Feeding a diet that includes at least 70% grass and good quality hay (oat, timothy or orchard hay), 20-30% fruit and vegetables and no more than 5-10% pellets is the best way to prevent dental problems. Guinea pigs also require daily supplementation with 25-50mg of Vitamin C tablets.

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