

ACBA: Health

ALOPECIA IN CAVIES

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Hair loss, or alopecia, in cavies is a commonly seen problem. With its many causes, hair loss and coat thinning remain a focus of concern for both owners and exhibitors. Proper diagnosis is necessary for alleviation of those problems which are amenable to treatment. Diagnosis is based on the patterns of hair loss, associated signs of irritation, concurrent medical or physical conditions, and laboratory testing.

Parasites

By far the most common cause of hair loss in cavies is the infestation of ectoparasites. The mites and lice cause the hair loss by irritating the skin of the animal, who then scratches and chews at the coat. Such hair loss can be in patches or generally thinned over the body and is accompanied by scratched, flaking, or bleeding skin. Identification of the specific culprit is necessary for determining the appropriate treatment. Sarcoptic mange caused by *Trixacarus caviae*, a burrowing mite, is the most significant and potentially damaging infestation. Affected cavies are constantly and intensely itchy, can lose weight and condition, have poor breeding performance, and may progress to seizures. Topical treatment is relatively ineffective; oral or injectable ivermectin is the treatment of choice. The other lice and mites are more susceptible to topical application of cat flea powders or sprays.

Fungus

Fungal infections (ringworm) are another common cause of hair loss. Usually characterized by patches of missing hair and lots of skin flakes, ringworm is highly contagious to other animals and to people. The patches are commonly located on the face, ears and feet but can occur anywhere. This condition is usually not very itchy. Treatment can be accomplished with antifungal shampoos, dips, and/or ointments depending on the location of the affected areas.

Nutrition

Hair loss caused by medical conditions is characterized by general thinning over the entire body. Poor nutrition, organ failure, and general malaise produce excessive shedding. Diets low in protein or Vitamin C or with imbalances of other nutrients cause poor skin metabolism and inhibit hair regrowth. Maintenance of proper nutrition for cavies, especially during illness, is thus essential for hair coats and regrowth.

Metabolism

Young animals can sometimes experience metabolic alopecia. This commonly occurs around the time of weaning, when they lose baby coat and develop adult coat. This type of alopecia is differentiated from other causes by lack of abrasions and crusts. Resolution occurs as they mature and develop the adult coat.

Pregnancy and Lactation

Hormonal changes during pregnancy and lactation can cause several patterns of hair loss. In intensive breeding programs, sows' coats may thin as the body devotes its resources to the production of babies instead of the production of hair. Such thinning can also occur in "more leisurely" pregnancies, especially when the number in the litter is high. Pregnant or nursing sows may develop a patch of hair loss over the middle of the back that can be accompanied by flakes or self-inflicted abrasions. Assuming the sow has not been rebred, resolution will occur after the young are weaned. In older sows, thinned to complete hair loss of both flanks may occur and is often due to ovarian cysts or tumors. This condition is usually not life-threatening and rarely requires treatment.

As explained, the causes of alopecia in cavies are numerous and commonly experienced. For this reason, hair loss will forever remain a source of angst for the cavy fancier.

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