

ACBA: Health

HYPOCALCEMIA IN CAVIES

Contributions by:

Vaierie Blaes

Lisa Cohen

Marge Purdy

DEFINITION:

Hypocalcemia is a condition where the blood level of calcium decreases. This condition often occurs in pregnant sows late in gestation.

Although hypocalcemia appears to be more prevalent in Satin coated and Satin carrier animals, it has occurred in Non-satin sows. Also, most sows display symptoms of hypocalcemia prior to delivering. However, some sows have shown signs after giving birth. There is some speculation that sows that deliver "past their due date" may have lower levels of calcium in their bodies. The sows' bodies may not have enough calcium to start contractions.

SYMPTOMS:

The most noted symptom is involuntary muscle contractions, causing the muscles to be tense and hard. These usually start in the hindquarters and move upward. Eventually the contractions reach the head. This causes strange facial expressions. Seizures may rapidly follow if treatment is not readily available. Any noise or movement can stimulate the seizures, including picking them up to treat them. It is best to move the sow to a quiet, dark place so there will be little stimulation. Some preliminary signals prior to muscle contractions have been noticed. Some sows start chewing when they are eating, then appear to lose coordination. They are hungry, yet can't swallow without problems. They may appear startled, as if stung by a bee. Or, the sow may look terrified. Also, there may be an increase in vocalizations. These vocalizations are louder and more frantic. They might scream when picked up. They may sneeze repetitively. The sow can give the impression of being very hungry, begging for food when it's not time to eat. She may squint her eyes, which could be the beginning of facial contractions. Eventually, she may face the rear corner of her cage. At this point,

the sow may have trouble breathing, or she may drool excessively.

PROGNOSIS:

The symptoms can occur quickly. This may even cause the sow to deliver early. Marge stated that the earliest she has seen hypocalcemia was 3 weeks prior to delivery. The latest she has seen hypocalcemia was 5 days prior to delivery. She said her highest occurrence was 10 days prior to delivery date. However, Valerie has seen evidence of hypocalcemia a few days after delivery. If the sow begins to have seizures, and no intervention is used, she may die within 5 to 6 hours. This may vary according to the sow's general health, number of babies carried, and living conditions.

TREATMENT:

If a sow starts to seizure, you can orally administer fruit yogurt or a mixture of 1/2 Tums and Karo syrup every half hour. If available, Margo has found ice of Calphosan given subcutaneously, deters seizures. Sows usually go on to give birth without complications. They may lose one fetus due to the thrashing about while seizing.

PREVENTION:

Several preventative methods have proven to be helpful in alleviating hypocalcemia. Three to four weeks prior to expected delivery, offer fruit flavored yogurt 2 to 3 times a day. Also, a mixture of Tums and Karo syrup in water, or given directly orally daily, is useful. You may instead offer commercial feeds, such as Calf Manna, on a restricted basis.

I hope this article is helpful to you. If you have any more information on hypocalcemia or have had success with a particular treatment, please let us know.

Except as specified below, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including electronically, or transmitted by any means without permission in writing from the American Cavy Breeders Association (ACBA). Copying: Single copies of individual articles may be made for private use or research providing copies bear the ACBA copyright notice. Authorization does not extend to copies made or distributed for profit, commercial advantage, promotional purposes, to electronic storage or distribution, or to republication in any form. In all such cases, specific written permission from ACBA must be obtained. Permission for Other Use: Permission is granted for brief quotes with the customary acknowledgment of the source. To reprint a figure, table or other excerpt requires the consent of the ACBA. For permission contact: Lenore Gergen (ACBA Secretary), 16540 Hogan Avenue, Hastings, MN 55033. Opinions of individual authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the ACBA, its board or officers.