

ACBA: Health

SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDING OF THE SICK GUINEA PIG

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One of the best indicators of a guinea pig's health status is its appetite. When a cavy feels poorly, its consumption of food and water decreases. Many medical or physical problems can contribute to this decrease in appetite.

Nutritional support during these times of illness or stress will improve the cavy's chance of survival. In this article, I will outline my recipes for different force-feeding mixtures and when their use is indicated. Not all products and methods for maintaining nutritional levels will be discussed, only those that I routinely use.

Once in a while, a cavy owner or breeder will discover a pet that hasn't eaten its normal meal of pellets. Usually, the pet perks up by the next day and finishes its next meal. Occasionally, the guinea pig continues to refuse to eat and drink, or only picks at its food, indicating the development of a more serious situation. Prompt attention can sometimes resolve the problem completely. If force feeding is postponed for more than 24 hours, the cavy can become weak and dehydrated, making recovery more difficult. Nutritional support is indicated in any instance where a guinea pig hasn't consumed any or very little water or food in over 24 hours. Veterinary care should be sought for any cavy not responding to force feeding within about 8 hours, or if the animal is refusing to swallow (allows the food placed in the mouth to just sit there or dribble out.)

In cases where pregnant sows are NOT involved, I use a mixture based on strained vegetable baby food. I start with about 3 tablespoons of a favored vegetable, add 1 teaspoon of Karo syrup or honey, then add either dry baby cereal (mixed/oatmeal/rice) or pellet "powder" to thicken the mixture. The Oxbow product Critical Care for Herbivores may also be used. However, some cavies may rebel against the difference in taste from their regular pellet diet. The mixture should be thin enough to pass through a syringe or eye dropper to allow force feeding and be fed at room temperature. Pellet "powder" or Critical Care is preferred if prolonged feeding is expected as the more fibrous particles give the teeth something to grind against, thus reducing the chance for the development of overgrown molars. In addition, any type of fresh vegetable or fruit, fresh grass, hay, or rolled oats, etc. should be repeatedly offered to entice the cavy to eat.

Pregnant or nursing sows have different needs. Pregnant sows become toxic when their energy requirements exceed their nutrient intake. The body starts to utilize its fat stores, mobilizing fat to the liver and often overloading it. For these or nursing sows, my mixture base is fruit-flavored yogurt. (Mine like Dannon Blended Strawberry, Strawberry-Banana, and Peach.) It is a good source of easily digested protein and calcium. I use the same quantities as listed above but also add one crushed 500mg Tums tablet (for calcium) and use the cereal instead of pellet fines. I keep the mixture as low fat, high energy as possible to prevent further damage to the liver. This premise would also apply to any heavy animal that suddenly starts to lose weight (stress or environment change induced) and needs nutritional support. If the sow is heavy with young, I start force feeding when she misses the first complete meal of pellets. I will often force feed, at least once daily, even if she is eating some pellets/veggies. The additional calcium and energy will be beneficial at that stage of pregnancy and through the first week or two of lactation.

For nutritional support, I recommend feeding 12 - 15 cc (ml) *at least* 4 times daily for adult-sized guinea pigs. Obviously, small cavies or heavily pregnant sows will take less at a time (8 - 10 cc). I've had some cavies willingly eat 25 - 35 cc by syringe at a single feeding. (These were not ill, just unable to eat dry pellets.) Water or Pedialyte can also be offered by syringe but they do get a lot of fluid from the mixtures. 50-100 mg of Vitamin C should be given orally at least once daily. Some people also use Nutrical or Stat-VME, which can be added to the desired mixture. For cavies on antibiotics, I will alternate the baby foods recipe with yogurt base for one or two feedings per day. For any force feeding that serves as the cavy's only intake of solids and continues for more than 3 days, I switch from cereal to pellet 'powder'.

I have outlined the recipes I use and general guidelines for quantity and frequency of feeding. The importance of nutritional support during times of illness or stress should not be underestimated. Guinea pigs can quickly lose the will to live even when the condition doesn't seem serious. By maintaining its nutrient intake, the cavy will be better able to recover from its illness. Sometimes, just a little boost reminds them that living is better than the alternative.

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