

Diarrhea in Cavies – Part 1

Denise Talbott, DVM

It seems a given that if you raise cavies for any period of time you will at some point deal with an animal that has diarrhea. Diarrhea can range from being a very mild sign of GI distress to a fulminating rapidly advancing sign that heralds the demise of the animal. It can also be acute, coming and going quickly, or it can remain a chronic problem in an individual animal. Diarrhea itself is not a disease but a sign of something gone awry in the gastrointestinal tract. The truth of the matter is that without access to a laboratory we may never know the cause of the diarrhea.

It becomes very important in trying to assign a reason for the diarrhea to note the age and reproductive status of the animal as well as the diet and any changes in diet, housing and any changes in housing or movement of the animal, and antibiotic or other chemicals that may have been used recently in the animal. Sometimes stress by itself may cause a previously healthy animal to develop diarrhea.

DIET

Cavies need long strand fibers in their diet and will generally have overall better gut health if they are provided with hay several times a week. Lots of folks have successfully raised pigs without using hay or hay blocks and will have a different opinion, but Lance Jepson in his Exotic Animal Medicine recommends weaning babies to a diet high in long fiber (108). He believes it promotes a better transition to the adult diet by encouraging a more normal chewing action than just with pellets alone. Most of us provide hay and/or grass to our animals well before they are weaned. Long strand fiber also is beneficial in normal gut motility.

Vitamin C we all recognize as important in the prevention of scurvy with its problems of joint pain, subcutaneous bleeding and loose teeth. When a diet is deficient in Vit C, you may also get a malabsorption syndrome and a pyogranulomatous enteritis (Jepson 110). Signs associated with these may be failure to thrive and manure of abnormal consistency.

Cavies are also susceptible to changes in diet. A diet with a sudden influx of greens is routinely blamed as a cause of diarrhea (I personally have never seen this as a cause, but since many folks have, I include it here for completeness) and an increase in carbohydrates in the diet may cause a change in the flora of the gut which may also cause a bout of diarrhea from mild to severe.

Antibiotic Use

Cavies are very susceptible to gram negative overgrowth of flora in their gastrointestinal tract if inappropriate antibiotics are used. Gram positive flora are the predominate inhabitants of normal GI tracts in cavies and when antibiotics are used that kill off this normal flora, the gram negative bacteria proliferate. One of the main culprits is *Clostridium difficile* and signs in the cavy may include diarrhea, dehydration and death. Quesenberry recommends that all cavies treated with antibiotics also be given *Lactobacillus* (found in commercial preparations or in live culture yogurt).

Next time we will discuss diarrhea caused by viruses, bacteria and parasites. Treatment plans will also be given.

Jepson, Lance. Exotic Animal Medicine. Edinburgh:Saunders. 2009

Quesenberry, Katherine E, and James W Carpenter. Ferrets, Rabbits and Rodents Clinical Medicine and Surgery. Second Edition .St.Louis: Saunders. 2003.

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