



New Berlin Animal Hospital
3840 S. Moorland Rd.
New Berlin, WI 53151
Office: 262.782.6910
Web Site: NBAnHosp.com



FEEDING YOUR GUINEA PIG

Guinea pigs, like rabbits, are herbivores, although the physiology and function of their gastrointestinal system is less well understood than that of the rabbit which has been well investigated. The critical aspect of the diet of guinea pigs is their requirement for vitamin C, covered further below. Apart from that, the key to a healthy diet in a guinea pig is variety. Imagine what the guinea pig has to eat in its native environment of the South American forests: a bit of everything from fruits through greens to root vegetables. We often feed a dry guinea pig mix with few fresh vegetables and expect that to satisfy the animal's requirements. It does not.



Vitamin C

For every animal there is a set of essential nutrients and another set of non-essential nutrients. Animals need a regular dietary supply of essential ingredients, while they can produce their own supply of the non-essential nutrients. These essential elements differ between species so that, for instance, the cat and ferret require a regular supply of the amino acid taurine while other mammals like ourselves can produce taurine by metabolizing other amino acids. In the guinea pig and man one key essential nutrient is vitamin C. The vast majority of other animals can produce their own vitamin C from their intestinal bacterial flora but guinea pigs and human beings are not able to do this. This is why eighteenth century sailors developed scurvy when not able to eat fresh fruit. Vitamin C is vital in the normal development and maintenance of skin and mucosal surfaces like gums. It is also important in the healing of wounds to these structures. As well as predisposing to skin problems, a lack of vitamin C seems to make the body more prone to other diseases, infections and poor condition. A guinea pig, which is reluctant to walk, has swollen feet or joints, or hemorrhages and ulcers on its gums or elsewhere is likely to be deficient in vitamin C.

There is no reason why a guinea pig should be deficient in this nutrient, since it is available from fresh fruit and green vegetables. But it is a relatively unstable compound. If you are giving only a dry mix with old hay, most of the vitamin C will have decomposed by oxidation. If your guinea pig develops a deficiency, it is much better to give a crushed tablet by mouth rather than in drinking water, since the vitamin breaks down in water and loses its potency. However, mixing about 100 mg of ascorbic acid twice daily in fresh water will meet the vitamin C requirement. Fresh green vegetable including broccoli can be fed as well (but avoid only broccoli which can bind thyroid hormone.)

Additional dietary requirements

Given that guinea pigs are adapted to a diet of fibrous vegetable matter, good quality grass hay is important. Avoid only alfalfa hay which can cause bladder stones, relying instead mainly on timothy, bermuda, or clover hay. Small amounts of commercial guinea pig pellets form the remainder of the diet. A good mix like this will keep your guinea pig happy and healthy.