

Husbandry and hospitalisation of rabbits and Guinea pigs

Jessica Griffin, who is currently studying the Veterinary Nursing Degree course at University College Dublin (UCD), has had many years' experience in handling animals; here, she discusses the appropriate housing and hospitalisation of rabbits and Guinea pigs



Starting her career as a farm assistant at a busy, open farm in north London, Jessica then worked as an animal care attendant and teaching assistant role at a college, delivering courses to 16-19-year-olds in animal care and veterinary nursing. In these roles, she worked with livestock, poultry, avians and exotics, and small furrries. Following this, Jessica worked as a veterinary care assistant for the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) in the UK, where she gained valuable experience within the veterinary industry. When she moved to Ireland March 2016 she took on the role of animal care attendant at UCD.

Exotic, small, 'furry' pets are becoming increasingly popular in the Republic of Ireland. These include hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits, rats, gerbils and mice, as well as degus, chinchillas and ferrets. Although small, these little animals have varied and sometimes complex requirements that must be understood in order to ensure their health and welfare needs are met. As front-line advocates for animal health and welfare, it is important for veterinary nurses/support staff to be aware of these needs, and to work with owners to ensure that their 'small furrries' can live long, healthy and stress-free lives. There are specialist exotic veterinary practices in Ireland, but this rise in exotic pet ownership may mean that more general practices may see more of this type of patient. Understanding the needs of these animals also allows the veterinary team to care for these patients appropriately, should they be admitted into the hospital.

This article will focus specifically on rabbits and Guinea pigs. It was previously considered acceptable practice to keep Guinea pigs and rabbits together. Over recent years,

however, organisations such as the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAF) have campaigned to change this, and advise that, as sociable creatures, rabbits should be kept with other rabbits, preferably a neutered male and neutered female together.

DIETARY REQUIREMENTS

The dietary needs of rabbits and Guinea pigs differ also. Guinea pigs cannot synthesise vitamin C, and so, are prone to scurvy (hypovitaminosis C). They must be fed an appropriate grass-based feed specially formulated for Guinea pigs. Vitamin C may also be added to drinking water at 10mg/kg daily, or 1g/L of water, but this method is questionable due to the rapid breakdown of vitamin C when exposed to air and chemicals present in drinking water, notably chlorine. Foods that can be fed to Guinea pigs that are high in vitamin C include kale, broccoli, kiwi, strawberries, bell pepper, spinach, pak and bok choy, dandelion greens and tomatoes, among others. A variety of these foods should be offered, and it goes without saying that fruits should be fed in moderation in order to avoid causing diarrhoea and obesity. Cabbage should be avoided, as it causes uncomfortable bloat, and watery vegetables such as cucumber and iceberg lettuce. Symptoms of vitamin C deficiency in Guinea pigs include:

- fatigue;
- anorexia and weight loss;
- a rough coat;
- swollen joints, causing an unwillingness to move and pain when being picked up or restrained;
- diarrhoea;
- ocular and nasal discharge; and
- internal skeletal-muscular haemorrhage.

A common problem either species may present for at a practice is dental disease. This is caused by insufficient wear on teeth due to poor diet, or lack of a suitable means of expressing normal gnawing behaviour. The teeth of rabbits and Guinea pigs grow continuously throughout their lifetimes. Both rabbits and Guinea pigs should be fed an unlimited amount of hay or grass in their diets, so as to wear down the cheek teeth. Suitable, pet-friendly chew toys should be provided to wear down incisor teeth, or sticks from untreated fruit trees (not stone fruit), cardboard tubes and boxes. Symptoms of dental problems in rabbits and Guinea pigs include:

- anorexia and subsequent weight loss;
- drooling; and
- in severe cases, oral lesions and teeth growing into the gums.

As a guide, 80% of a rabbit or Guinea pig's diet should be made up of hay or grass. Pellets or nuggets should only make up 5% of the total diet, which equates to an egg-cup full daily. The remaining 15% should consist of leafy green vegetables.

HOUSING

Rabbit and Guinea pig accommodation is very similar. A solid wooden-framed enclosure with wire mesh with a

separate sheltered sleeping compartment accessible via a 'pop-hole' can be used for either species. Hiding areas can be provided in the form of plastic 'igloos', or even cardboard boxes, which can also be gnawed. Rabbits can be trained to use litter trays to make cleaning out accommodation easier. Separate outdoor-exercise runs can be provided in the form of a sturdy wooden- or metal-framed run with wire mesh sides and a concrete base for ease of cleaning and to prevent rabbits from digging and tunnelling. In the absence of a concrete base, ensure outdoor rabbit runs on grass have a wire mesh 'skirt' or are dug into the ground to prevent unwanted escape or burrowing predators such as stoats and weasels from gaining access. A deep box or children's plastic sandpit of untreated soil or play sand can be provided to allow rabbits to perform natural digging behaviour, and large cardboard tubes for tunnelling behaviour. Sturdy boxes can be used to provide look-out points. Outdoor exercise pens must be at least 8ft in length. In 2011, the RWAF launched its 'A Hutch Is Not Enough' campaign to highlight the importance of outdoor access and exercise to pet rabbits. Rabbits need accommodation measuring at least 6ft in length x 2ft wide x 2ft high, depending of course on the size of the rabbit (giant versus dwarf breeds). This follows the 'three-hop' rule; the space should allow the rabbit to take three hops, as well as reach upwards without the ears touching the top of the accommodation. A space too small is not only detrimental to the rabbit's mental wellbeing, but can also cause crippling spinal problems. Rabbits and Guinea pigs should never be housed outdoors year-round in the UK and Irish climate. If housed outdoor during warmer months, ensure that accommodation is escape, weather and predator-proof. This includes airborne predators, such as birds of prey, and burrowing predators, such as stoats, foxes and weasels.

VETERINARY PRACTICE

In terms of visiting the veterinary clinic, it must be borne in mind that Guinea pigs and rabbits are prey animals, and, as such, visiting a busy practice full of cats and dogs can be extremely stressful. If possible, rabbits and Guinea pigs should be booked in for visits during quieter periods of the day, and owners asked to wait and be seen in perhaps a lesser-used consult room, as opposed to one that smells strongly of the canine visitor before. Small cat carriers are suitable transportation vessels for rabbits and Guinea pigs, and plastic small-animal carry boxes with handles big enough to carry Guinea pigs or dwarf rabbits. Ensure rabbits are never transported in cardboard boxes, as there is always a danger that these can be chewed out of. Cardboard boxes may also become soggy and less durable due to urine occurring en route. If being hospitalised, accommodate rabbits and Guinea pigs again in an area separate to canine and feline patients, in an area of the hospital that is quieter and less busy than others. Ask owners to bring along an item of the patient's cage furniture from home, such as a nest or hiding box, to provide some comfort in familiarity, and a pouch of the

patient's usual pellet food, as well as hay to last them the duration of their stay. Sudden changes in diet in rabbits and Guinea pigs can cause digestive upset.

Provide water in a water bottle, not a dish, to avoid spillages and mess. Cover the front of the patient's kennel with a clean towel or blanket. This minimises stress and enables the patient to feel hidden and protected. A healthy cage mate can be brought along for companionship during the patient's stay in the hospital if the owner feels that this may reduce stress for the patient and will not upset existing relationships between animals remaining at home. When handling the patient, use the 'less-is-more' approach. Rabbits have extremely strong hind limbs and sharp back claws. Incorrect handling can cause unnecessary stress to both species, and devastating spinal injuries to rabbits. It goes without saying that rabbits must never be lifted by the ears and that scruffing is an outdated practice. Both the front and rear of the animal must be supported, and keep carrying distances to a minimum. A towel can be used to 'burrito' a rabbit in the same way a cat would. Bear in mind that both species will be 'spooked' being lifted out of top-opening carriers, as you will appear as an airborne predator to them. It is a good idea to change uniform before handling rabbit and Guinea pig patients after handling cats and dogs, as even the smell of canine and feline patients may cause stress. Provide plenty of hiding opportunities to

patients in their hospital environment and keep interaction to a minimum.

Although small, rabbits and Guinea pigs can present their own set of challenges to veterinary staff. Familiarisation of the husbandry and behaviour of these animals will enable veterinary staff to plan for and provide the means to make their hospital visits as stress-free as possible, as well as provide owners with sound advice in order to ensure that these animals live long and healthy lives at home. A high-fibre diet consisting mainly of hay or grass and suitable sturdy accommodation of an adequate size with plenty of accessories enabling natural behaviour are essential to their wellbeing. Confidence in correct handling and restraint will ensure minimal stress and injury is done to both patient and handler.

USEFUL LINKS

<http://www.rabbitwelfare.org.uk>

<http://www.guinealynx.info>

READING LIST

The Complete Textbook of Veterinary Nursing, second edition

Aspinall, Victoria, 2011. The Complete Textbook of Veterinary Nursing (second edition) Butterworth – Heinemann Ltd

FarmLab
DIAGNOSTICS

The Gateway to Animal Health

Elphin, Co. Roscommon
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