The following article is courtesy of Oxbow Pet Products. Their foods are available at Avian and Exotic Pet Clinic of Roanoke.

Feeding the Guinea Pig

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Guinea pigs are becoming a more valued, loved and cared for pet in the eyes of their owners and as a result, veterinary care for guinea pigs has increased. Veterinarians seeing guinea pigs are noticing several health problems attributed to nutrition: Vitamin C deficiency, gastrointestinal ileus, obesity, enteritis and urolithiasis.

Signs of Vitamin C deficiency (scurvy) include: hind leg weakness, gum inflammation, rough fur coat and sometimes bleeding in the joints or under the skin. Like humans, guinea pigs are unable to produce their own Vitamin C and require a dietary source. Daily requirements of Vitamin C range from 20-50 mg per kg of body weight. In order to prevent Vitamin C deficiency and subsequent scurvy, Oxbow recommends feeding your adult guinea pig Cavy Cuisine, a pelleted diet containing stabilized Vitamin C. Offering one of Oxbow’s 50 mg GTN-50C vitamin tablets on a daily basis will also ensure your guinea pig is receiving all the Vitamin C it needs.

Gastrointestinal ileus (malfunction of the digestive tract due to gut slowdown problems) is commonly seen in guinea pigs on low fiber diets. Many times pet owners do not notice the signs associated with gastrointestinal slowdown until it is too late. Decreased appetite, a bloated or tense abdomen, along with lethargy and a decrease in the volume and size of feces passed are all signs of gastrointestinal ileus. Diets that incorporate high levels of non-digestible fiber, in the form of free-choice grass hay, promote increased gut motility and thereby prevent this gut slowdown.

Obesity in guinea pigs can lead to respiratory, heart and liver disease. Obesity not only leads to the previously mentioned health problems, but can also prevent coprophagy, which is necessary for the maintenance of normal gastrointestinal health. Cavy Cuisine was designed to prevent obesity by adding sufficient fiber to aid in overall digestion and eliminate those grains that raise fat content.

Enteritis (intestinal inflammation associated with toxin production) is a problem commonly associated with diets that contain high levels of energy (starch and glucose). A low-fiber, high-starch diet promotes gut hypomotility and changes the intestinal pH and microbial population which allows pathogens (bad bacteria) to produce toxins that can be fatal. The guinea pig with enteritis may have soft stools and be hunched and inactive due to increased GI gas production and the resulting abdominal pain. High-fiber, low-starch Cavy Cuisine is formulated to prevent enteritis.
Urolithiasis (bladder stones) is being seen in more and more guinea pigs. Although many are secondary to urinary tract infections, a certain percentage of stones are caused by an imbalance of calcium and phosphorus in the diet. Forage feed, the natural diet for a wild guinea pig, has a higher calcium to-phosphorus ratio. Grains have the inverse relationship and contain more phosphorus than calcium. Research has proven that diets containing an inverse ratio of calcium and phosphorus can cause stones and soft tissue calcifications. Dietary levels of Vitamin D and magnesium may also influence the development of bladder stones.

Guinea pigs are strict herbivores, and like rabbits, are hind gut fermentors that practice coprophagy (ingestion of one’s own feces). As hind gut fermentors, guinea pigs digest much of their food in the cecum and colon (large intestine) which are at the end of the digestive tract. The cecum, a large, thin-walled sac located at the junction of the small and large intestine, contains up to 65% of gastrointestinal (GI) contents. Within the cecum, bacteria and protozoa aid digestion of foods taken in by the guinea pig.

Fiber is needed for these bacteria and protozoa to stay in balance and function properly. Fiber also aids in maintaining normal GI motility. Without fiber, the gastrointestinal tract slows down, resulting in subsequent changes in the cecum pH, fermentation and bacterial population. With time, these changes in the intestinal tract environment can lead to indigestion.

You can provide this essential fiber by feeding your guinea pig free-choice grass hay. Hay also helps prevent boredom by satisfying the guinea pig’s innate desire to chew, which is an important means of dental health maintenance.

Oxbow Pet Products agrees with nutritionists and veterinarians that less nutrient-dense diets are needed to prolong the lives of small mammals, especially guinea pigs and rabbits. Through the science of nutrition, Oxbow Pet Products wants to provide adult guinea pigs with the opportunity to live longer and healthier lives.

References:
