

Heart Problems in Guinea Pigs, Symptoms and Treatment

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May 12, 2007

It seems to become more and more common, or noticed, that guinea pigs can have heart related health problems. However, many vets will know next to nothing about this, or deny that heart problems in guinea pigs even exist. This may happen not only with vets that actually have no experience in treating guinea pigs, but also with the ones that do (and might be great exotic vets otherwise).

This article will give you a rough understanding about heart related problems in guinea pigs, the symptoms to look for, diagnostic possibilities, and treatment options. It will not replace the visit to a seasoned vet!

Symptoms

First I will list out typical symptoms of heart problems in guinea pigs, then I will describe what happened with my own pigs.

It seems that many so called heart pigs will have recurring respiratory problems. They will show symptoms of Upper Respiratory Infections (URI) like hooting and/or breathing problems. The pigs are often (not always) overweight, and also quite laid back. Due to the URI like symptoms they will be treated with antibiotics which may or may not relieve the symptoms. Eventually some pigs will loose weight, since they won't be able to eat enough. For them it's like breathe or eat. When the pig cannot eat sufficient amounts over longer periods, it might develop teeth problems. So if you have a guinea pig with frequent URIs think 'heart' and have an x-ray taken.

Diagnostics

There are some ways to diagnose heart problems in guinea pigs beside the examination with a stethoscope.

X-ray

An x-ray will show if the pig's heart is normal sized or enlarged. An enlarged heart is typical for heart pigs. Keep in mind, enlarged can mean slightly enlarged. It doesn't have to be huge.

EKG

Yes, you can do an EKG on a guinea pig. I had it done with Patty. The result was inconclusive though. I do not know if this is a typical result for guinea pigs, or if this had to do with Patty. Talk to your vet about this.

Ultrasound

Another option is ultrasound, which can be used to diagnose many diseases, not only heart related ones. Your vet may or may not offer this. This can also be a quite costly procedure.

Treatment

The typical, long term treatment is heart medication. The drugs of choice are Enacard (or Enalapril) and Lotensin (Fortekor). Enacard is the older medication and can have negative side effects on the kidneys. Lotensin is a newer derivative which does not seem to have those effects, so it should be the drug of choice. Unfortunately, there are no studies available that look into the long term effects of this type of treatment for guinea pigs. A third medication is Lasix (Furosemide), which is used as a diuretic. This drug is given when the animal has a congestive heart failure or is close to having one. It will very quickly aid the body in releasing the excessive water, so the heart has to work less hard. More about these drugs can be found under the medication resource for heart problems.

My Own Pigs

Patty was the first of my pigs with heart problems. She did not have any URIs, and she did not loose any weight. She was however rather overweight, she hooted, and she had cyanotic (blue) lips. Since Patty's lips were pink, the discoloring could be seen. Patty was an old lady, and just like us humans, with age come certain diseases. What caught my attention was the increasing occurrence of the hooting sounds she made, and of course the blue lips. Diagnostic procedures were: x-ray and EKG. The x-rays showed that her heart was slightly enlarged. The result of the EKG however has been inconclusive. The fact that she showed cyanotic lips once in a while convinced my vet to put her on heart medication. Patty took Enacard twice a day. Her heart was getting older though, and not any better. So once in a while she had increased problems, and then she also had to take Lasix for a certain amount of time.

Lilo was my second pig with a heart condition. She showed respiratory problems, but nothing else. She was treated a couple of times with antibiotics, which didn't fix the problem. After we put her on Lotensin, the respiratory problems disappeared.

Ramona was my third pig diagnosed with heart problems. She did not show any signs of respiratory problems and she didn't hoot. All over a sudden she lost weight and wouldn't eat. Not eating is always a sign that something is wrong. Since she has a known problem with her urinary tract, we took an x-ray to look for bladder stones. She did not have any stones, but we found that her heart was enlarged. Ramona had several x-rays taken before, and her heart was normal then. In addition her front teeth had been scissored, probably due to not eating right (teeth problems are often a sign of something going on in regards to the health of your guinea pig). Her teeth have been fixed, and she was put on Lotensin. She is back to normal ever since, enjoying her food a lot.

Last but not least we had **Louise**, who was also an older pig. She didn't show any specific signs at all. She lost weight without apparent reason, had overactive ovaries which contributed to her weight

loss, and she was very nervous (very likely caused by those pesky hormones). Finally she was x-rayed and we found that she had some arthritis in her back and that her heart was slightly enlarged. In Louise's case the heart condition was something we found when looking into her overall issues. Louise was on Enacard. In addition she also took homeopathic remedies which helped somewhat with her nervousness, and she was also on a HCG treatment because of her ovaries. All of this together seemed to have stabilized her. The weight loss stopped, or was slowed down at least, she was more relaxed, and she also ate more.

Conclusion

Heart problems in guinea pigs are a real thing. It is absolutely no death sentence when your pig is diagnosed with it. Treatment is very easy, very successful, not that expensive and not a torture for the pig. Patty lived a long life despite her heart problems, Ramona is doing great after we started treating her for heart problems. True, those medications do not taste all that great, but eventually the pigs get used to it. Ramona takes her meds like a treat.

Guinea pigs are living beings with a heart, if your pig shows any of the symptoms described here do not forget to talk to your vet about a possible heart condition. In my opinion it is just ridiculous to insist that cavies cannot have a heart condition.

Resources for Heart Problems in Guinea Pigs

Experience Reports

- Heart Problems in Guinea Pigs: <http://www.petshub.com/forums/showthread.php?t=11819>
- Correct Lasix dosage: <http://www.guinealynx.info/forums/viewtopic.php?p=48336#48336>

Medication

Enacard:

- http://www.marvistavet.com/html/body_enalapril.html
- <http://www.healthsquare.com/newrx/vas1477.htm>

Lasix:

- http://www.marvistavet.com/html/body_furosemide.html

Lotensin:

- <http://www.pigloo.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=479>
- <http://www.healthsquare.com/newrx/LOT1238.HTM>

Nebulizer

- <http://home.houston.rr.com/lundquist/Purrie/Nebulizer/Nebulizer.htm>