

Care of the Pregnant Guinea Pig

Breed the female guinea pig at a relatively young age

The birth canal of the female guinea pig (also known as a sow) is relatively narrow. As the guinea pig grows, the pelvic canal fuses to become a permanent bony bridge in males and unbred females. In the pregnant female, the pelvic canal relaxes and stretches in response to hormonal secretion. To prevent serious problems during delivery, the sow should be bred before the pelvic canal fuses. The sow reaches puberty around 2 months of age and ideally, she should be bred between 4-7 months of age. Guinea pigs in captivity can breed year-round.

Prevent obesity in the breeding sow

Pregnancy-related diseases are common in guinea pigs. The prognosis for both the sow and her young is poor with these conditions, and prevention is much more successful than treatment. Reduce the risk of pregnancy-related diseases by preventing obesity:

- DO NOT overfeed the sow.
- DO offer high-fiber foods.
- DO encourage exercise.

Pregnancy toxemia is a very serious condition that can occur during late pregnancy, usually anytime from 2 weeks before birth to 2 weeks postpartum. Fasting pregnancy toxemia, or pregnancy ketosis, is particularly common in obese females, often during their first or second pregnancy. The energy demands of the large, growing fetuses can cause the female to breakdown fats, particularly if she goes off feed for even a brief period of time. The rapid breakdown of fat leads to a variety of serious metabolic problems. The sow may exhibit a poor appetite, lethargy, lack of muscle control or coordination, and difficulty breathing. These signs can progress to muscle spasms, paralysis, and even death.

Sows can also suffer from a high rate of stillbirth and early neonatal death caused by a *difficult birth or dystocia*. A difficult birthing process can arise when the sow is overweight, if the pups are too large for the birthing canal, or when the first breeding is delayed until the sow is old enough for the pelvic canal to be fused.

What can be done to minimize the risk of pregnancy-related problems?

The average guinea pig pregnancy lasts 68 days, with a reported range of 59-72 days. Litter size typically consists of 2-4 pups with a range of 1-13 young. A larger litter will result in a shorter pregnancy.

Continue to encourage exercise & prevent obesity to minimize the risk of problems in the pregnant sow.

Diet: DO ensure food and water is readily available and easily accessible.
DO supplement vitamin C.
DO provide adequate dietary calcium, especially during late pregnancy.
DO NOT change the diet or feeding routine during late pregnancy.

Exercise: DO provide adequate space and encourage exercise.

Stress: DO minimize stress.
DO NOT make any changes in diet or housing during late pregnancy.

Your veterinarian will want to evaluate the sow, particularly if her pregnancy is considered high risk. Your veterinarian will gently feel the belly and pelvis, and obtain x-rays to assess the size and number of fetuses and to evaluate the sow's pelvic canal. A normal open or unfused pelvis should be very distinct in late pregnancy. Your veterinarian may also want to perform ultrasound to determine if the fetuses are alive.

Closely monitor the sow during late pregnancy

Closely monitor the sow's appetite, attitude, and eliminations, particularly during late pregnancy when obvious distension of the abdomen is observed. The pregnant sow can double her weight and her food consumption may triple. In late pregnancy, it can be difficult for the sow to move around so make sure she has easy access to food and water.

Contact your veterinarian if any of these changes are observed:

Appetite: Your guinea pig's food intake is poor.
Eliminations: Fecal droppings are absent or reduced in volume.
Attitude: The sow exhibits lethargy or lack of energy.
Discharge: Bloody or discolored vaginal discharge is observed.

The birthing process

The time of delivery can often be difficult to predict in guinea pigs because the sow does not build a nest and because of the relatively long pregnancy. Birth can occur at any time of day, but often occurs at night. During the birthing process, the sow will squat down on all four limbs. The course of birth is normally very fast. An uncomplicated delivery usually takes about 30 minutes with an average of 3-5 minutes between pups. After the pup is born, the sow will lick the newborn and ingest the fetal membranes although young may be left unattended until the last pup is expelled. The placenta is passed once the last pup is born and it is normal for the sow, as well as any other guinea pigs in the enclosure, to ingest the placenta.

Veterinary attention is indicated when the sow shows evidence of exhaustion, persistent and unproductive abdominal contractions (e.g., no delivery following 20 minutes of sustained contractions) or excessive bleeding. Medical intervention is also indicated with signs of fetal distress or death, such as passage of a green, ink-like vaginal discharge. When evaluating the sow in distress, your veterinarian may want to repeat x-rays and ultrasound and obtain lab work. An emergency cesarean section is often indicated with dystocia.

The pup

Newborn guinea pigs, also known as “pups” or “young”, are very well developed at birth (birth weight 50-100 grams or 1.75-3.5 ounces). Pups are born fully furred with teeth and open eyes. The young are able to crawl within minutes, stand shortly after birth, and walk and groom within a day. The normal guinea pig mother does not seek out her young—which may have something to do with the presence of teeth at birth! Nevertheless, the sow will sit quietly and allow her young to nurse. She will also lick her pups’ rumps to stimulate urination and defecation during the first 2-3 weeks of life.

Although nursing continues for several weeks, pups often begin nibbling on solids by day 2. Provide pellets, hay, and a variety of fresh vegetables so pups can experiment with these food items. Supplementation of young is particularly important with large litters in the unlikely event the sow cannot produce sufficient milk. Pups are typically weaned at 21 days (range 15-28 days) or at a body weight of 150-200 grams. Orphaned young can be weaned as early as day 5 but it is recommended to allow pups to nurse for 3 weeks whenever possible.

Conclusion

Proper management of the pregnant sow requires an understanding of the risk factors for pregnancy-related disease and an ability to recognize early signs of problems. Proper care and careful monitoring is critical to improve the odds of a successful delivery. To minimize risk, encourage exercise and prevent obesity while ensuring adequate nutrition and water is readily available. Minimize stress and avoid any changes in the diet or housing during late pregnancy.

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