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Syringe Feeding Basics

Information contained in this article is for guidance only and is no substitute for proper Veterinary care. Syringe feeding should always be done by adults and never left to children.

If your guinea stops eating for more than a few hours or is eating much less than normal, you will need to start syringe feeding them. Guineaes are designed to graze their way through the day and always have food going through their intestines. Sick guineas that can't eat on their own will go into a rapid decline and potentially painful death if the problem is not spotted quickly. Syringe feeding can often mean the difference between life and death for your piggy.

Diagnosis from a guinea-competent Vet is important to find the underlying cause of the problem and treat it appropriately. Conditions such as gastric torsion or gastric blockage must be treated before feeding, hence the importance of a Veterinary diagnosis.

Signs to look out for include:

- guineas that are fluffed up and looking miserable - guineas in pain may go off their food. Take the pain away and they often start eating again. Pain comes in many different forms including lip sores, mouth ulcers, oral fungal infections, post-operative pain, cystitis, bladder stones, major skin problems, sore joints etc.
- weight loss - this can be gradual or sudden, so regular handling and weighing will help to avoid you missing this until it is too late.
- guineas that are picking at their food and not eating as much as usual. This could be because of teeth / mouth problems or because they are in pain.
- lack of poops - if there isn't enough food going through the intestines, output will decrease or there may be none at all.

What to feed:

Oxbow Critical Care (based on Timothy Hay) is one of the most important items to have in your Piggy First Aid Kit. Oxbow describe it as "a high fibre, complete syringe feeding formula for herbivores that are not eating due to illness or that are recovering from surgery." Supreme Science Recovery is an alternative, but not recommended for guineas with bladder stones / sludge as it is based on Alfalfa and high in Calcium. If you don't have either of these, you could make a mix from your normal dried pellets such as Oxbow Cavy Cuisine or Supa Guinea Excel.

All these products need to be mixed with a small amount of hot water until it has the texture of mashed potato/ thick soup. Leave it to cool and feed it to your guinea when it is slightly warm. Sick guineas don't usually appreciate cold food. Consistency is something that you need to experiment with - your guinea may have problems taking the mix easily if it is too thick or too watery.

How much to feed:

The recommended daily intake for Oxbow Critical Care is 50mg per kilo of body weight, so a guinea weighing 1kg (2.2lbs) would require around 50ml per day divided between 4-5 feeds per day. These numbers are only a guideline and you may find that your guinea will take more than this, that's fine.

Only make up as much as you need for one or two feeds. Keep the remainder in the fridge and warm it up before the next feed. As you are feeding your guinea, make a note of how much food they are taking at each feed. Weigh your guinea at the same time every day, and if they are losing weight, you are not getting enough food into them, so try increasing the amount given at each feed, or add an extra feed each day.

Water is also required to ensure that your guinea doesn't become dehydrated as this can lead to kidney failure. Alternating every couple of syringes of food with 0.5ml of water usually works well. Make sure the water is given slowly as you don't want to shoot a syringe full of water to the back of your guinea's throat and choke them, or have it end up in their lungs.



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What to feed with:

1ml syringes are the best size to use. You will need several as they don't last very long if you are syringe feeding a guinea for more than a day or so. For feeding Critical Care, you will need to make a few adjustments to your syringe so that the food will go up the syringe.



Syringe 1 shows the syringe as it comes - this is fine for giving your guinea water.

Syringe 2 shows the syringe with the end cut off and the rubber plunger sticking out. This is dangerous because you don't want an already sick guinea eating a piece of rubber!

Syringe 3 shows a syringe where the end has been heated for a few seconds over a lighted flame (gas hob for example). The plastic has then been pushed in slightly to round off any sharp bits and just enough to stop the black rubber plunger from being able to escape.

How to feed:

Make your guinea comfortable. Sit him on a nice soft towel or blanket on your lap. Fill the syringe with food and gently place it in your guinea's mouth. You are aiming to get the syringe towards the back of the mouth, so go in at the side of the mouth, behind the front teeth. Gently squeeze out about 0.3ml of food and let the guinea eat it before putting any more in. Patience is required here and you need to go at the pace of your guinea. Once guineas get used to taking the syringe, you can try letting them take a little more food each time. Most can manage 1ml at a time with a bit of practice. If your guinea is uncooperative and waves his head around, you will need to wrap him in a towel so that only his head is showing. You can then hold his head steady and insert the syringe in his mouth. Most guineas soon get used to taking food by syringe and don't need to be towel wrapped.

Hygiene:

Ensure that all equipment you use for syringe feeding is kept clean. Warm food and saliva make a great breeding ground for nasty bugs, hence only making up small amounts of food each time. Keep your guinea's mouth clean and ensure that you gently wipe away any food that is left around the area after each feed (fragrance-free Baby Wipes work well). When your guinea has finished each feed, make the last couple of syringes water to swill out their mouths and leave them nice and clean.

Where to buy your supplies:

Vets usually have Supreme Science Recovery but don't often stock Oxbow Critical Care. [Thistle Cavies Rescue](#) sells both Oxbow Critical Care and syringes in their shop, and it is also available from [SPH Supplies](#). You also need to be aware that there is another product on the market called Critical Care Formula. This is not what you want, so do make sure that you are buying **OXBOW Critical Care**. Please get supplies in before you need them! Guineas have a habit of stopping eating after the shops have closed, especially on weekends and Bank Holidays.....

These are only the basics, but should be enough to help your guinea if he stops eating all of a sudden.

We recommend that you print a copy of this article and keep it somewhere safe for when you need it.

This article is dedicated to Possum who was being syringe fed at the time of writing.

