



Administering Oral Medications

Guinea pigs may need medication for almost any kind of ailment. While some guinea pigs get through life without falling ill, it can be assumed that the relative majority will, at some point, require treatment of some kind.

Medications come in three administration methods: parenteral (injected), topical (on the skin), and oral (by mouth). Injections are usually performed by veterinarians, although some owners may have been taught how to inject their guinea pigs for specific medical reasons. Topical medicines - including shampoos - tend to be simple to use. Oral medication is among the most common prescribed for guinea pigs, and given oral medication can be prescribed for almost any ailment, this is the one I am focusing my advice upon.

The first word of warning here: **never put medication or supplements into a guinea pig's water**. There are some very serious problems with this method and it defies all logic. Issues with this method include the following:

1. **The dosage will be inaccurate.** Even if the pig drinks the entire bottle full of water immediately (never a good thing!) and thereby "should" ingest the full meds/supplement dosage, there is no guarantee that the water does not drip or get spilt/spat out. Every drop of medicated water that is lost instantly alters the dosage the guinea pig can obtain from the remaining water. There is a reason vets have guidelines to help them prescribe a very specific dosage of medication according to *any* animal's weight and needs; if too much is given it may prove toxic, but if anything less is given it is almost certain to prove ineffective - *and is tantamount to giving your guinea pig no treatment at all!* Likewise with supplements, if the guinea pig needs additional Vitamin C, this must be given *directly* to the guinea pig to ensure a safe and effective dosage is ingested.
2. **Most guinea pigs live with at least one other cagemate.** Splitting the pigs up when one is ill is very often unnecessary and can, in many cases, even be detrimental to the sick pig. Thus if cagemates are kept together and medication/supplements are put into the water, there is no way of monitoring how much the sick pig drinks - and there is a very high chance that the healthy pig will end up drinking some of the medication. Not good for either pet.
3. **Guinea pigs need fresh, clean water.** It is a basic need – they have a right, even, to access fresh clean water as pets in this country. Medication and supplements will distort the taste of the water, discouraging the pigs from drinking from it. Dehydration is not a problem you want to add to your guinea pig's existing illness!

If a vet should advise you put any medication or supplement in the water, as some unfortunately still do, I very strongly recommend asking for a specific dosage for you to administer neat, directly to the guinea pig instead.

How to Give Oral Meds

When syringing anything into a guinea pig, always insert the syringe via the diastema. This is the gap either side of the mouth behind the incisors - if you try to get into the mouth through those front teeth, you will have a lot of difficulty! Push the syringe slightly (and slowly) on top of the tongue towards the fleshy cheek pads - at this stage the pig usually starts complaining, trying to open and close his mouth and wriggling, and this is the time to administer the meds. Push the plunger of the syringe steadily - don't squirt anything quickly, but do aim for a smooth action. For those who are unsure, you can start with the guideline of putting 0.3ml of liquid into the mouth at a time, giving the pig 3-5 seconds to swallow before putting in the remainder. Rule of thumb is that if the guinea pig is making a chewing motion with his jaws, he is swallowing anything that is being put into his mouth.



When tablets are to be administered, there are two methods that can be employed. One is simply to use a finger to very carefully push the tablet towards the back of the mouth, just the same as you would with the syringe, until the guinea pig has no choice but to crunch it. This can only be done with small tablets, and it does take a few goes to get the hang of it. It is a very handy skill to have, however, so worth learning.

If the tablet is on the large side, or if you are uncertain whether the size is suitable, then the easiest and most recommended method is to use a pestle and mortar to crush the tablet into an ultra-fine grind. Once crushed, add a small amount of water (variable depending on tablet size, most require approx. 1ml water). Mix thoroughly and use a 1ml syringe to administer the full amount of water and ground medication to the guinea pig.

There is also the very common problem of the guinea pig wriggling or fighting too much, making it difficult for the owner to even get the syringe or tablet into the mouth. One technique is to wrap the guinea pig carefully in a towel or pillowcase. Once he is wrapped, you can then hold the pig upright and comfort and support him by holding his back against your stomach. You can then adjust your hand position slightly to hold his head still while you syringe in the meds (see photo).



For those who are more experienced, or who have much more placid pigs, wrapping is not necessary. With your arm along the body of a standing pig, cuddling the animal's body next to yours, position your hand over the guinea pig's head with your thumb and forefinger at either corner of his mouth. Ease the tips of your fingers just inside the mouth slightly to open it up a little, and pop the syringe/tablet into the side of the mouth as before. This doesn't hold the lower jaw still, so he will still try to open and close his mouth, but with a gentle yet firm grip he will not actually be able to fully close his mouth, giving you enough time to administer the medication – and with all your fingers intact!

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