



Syringe-Feeding Guinea Pigs

Please note that you must seek the advice of an experienced veterinary surgeon as soon as possible to determine the cause of your guinea pig's refusal to eat. If your guinea pig appears bloated and is not defecating, then please do not give anything orally until an emergency consultation with the vet has ruled out a life-threatening intestinal twist or blockage.

There may come a time in your guinea pig's life when, for various reasons, she (or he) stops eating. This is more often than not because of illness, most commonly dental problems and oral infections (fungal and bacterial), and general conditions which cause pain, like cystitis (urinary tract infections/UTIs). Even if the initial illness does not seem to affect the teeth, it is likely that any number of your guinea's twenty teeth will overgrow while not eating for herself. Guinea pig teeth grow continually, at a rapid rate. As such any guinea pig suffering any illness should have routine checks carried out on their teeth to ensure that any problems are caught early, giving a better chance of correcting the problem.

It helps to identify the specific problem – not only speaking in terms of what illness the pig is suffering so that you are able to treat the main cause of the refusal to eat, but also to identify the exact problem that the pig has with eating. Is the guinea pig refusing to eat because:

- She is unable to eat? *Is she picking at foods, showing an interest in them but giving up after a sniff or a bite of even favourite foods? Or starting to chew foods then spitting them out/"gagging" on them, giving the appearance that she is "chewing on glass" as she tries to find a painless place in her mouth to chew?*
- She has lost her appetite? *This would be indicated by a complete lack of interest in any food, even if favourite foods are placed close by or left with her for some time.*

If your guinea pig is struggling to chew but is interested in food, this is the ideal combination. Syringe-feed as much as is necessary, offer soggy nuggets/pellets and soft and leafy vegetables and herbs. However, if despite your efforts your guinea pig is genuinely unable to swallow anything you try to feed her, you must stop trying to syringe-feeding and seek veterinary assistance urgently. If her swallow ability is lost there may not be a lot that can be done, but there is a chance that a different technique or efforts by someone different may be more successful. Seeking out a veterinarian urgently is still important, as the vet can administer pain relief and fluids by injection, which will make her comfortable, if nothing else.

Getting a guinea pig to start eating for herself again is something that requires patience and perseverance, and it depends heavily on the cause of the refusal to eat, the treatment for the root problem, and how well the pig herself deals with being under the weather. Sometimes it takes days, sometimes it takes months to get her eating again – every pig is different, and no two pigs respond the same.

Something else to remember is that, although you do need to monitor the sick pig's exact independent food intake and faecal output (droppings), you don't want to isolate the guinea pig entirely if she is normally part of a group or pair, as this can have a negative effect on her recovery. If you can keep her in a cage directly next to her fellow guinea friends (or the same cage, just divided down the middle), then do. This way she is very close to her friends, so her morale is less likely to drop as severely, yet you are able to accurately monitor what she



has eaten herself and whether her faeces are normal. The only exception to this advice would be if the poorly guinea pig has an infectious illness that poses a serious threat to the health of your other guineas. Please discuss this matter with your vet if you are unsure.

What tools are needed for syringe-feeding?

- A bowl and spoon - to mix up the syringe-food;
- A handful of 1ml syringes - you may find it easier to prepare multiple syringes by filling them prior to starting the feeding, therefore refilling less often, or just refill a single syringe on the go;
- Small bowl of water with clean 1ml syringe to provide water;
- Soft kitchen roll / small facecloth (flannel) – to clean up any food spilt from the mouth;
- Syringe-feeding chart and scales - to monitor how much you are feeding and how often, and to track her weight.

You will need to cut the tip off at the very top of the barrel of the 1ml syringe (as shown in the photos); this creates a hole the size of the barrel, making it much easier for the syringe feed to be sucked up and administered as compared to the miniscule hole of the tip.



If you are creating your own feed by soaking your guinea pig's dry nuggets, you will probably find that the paste is very smooth and does not contain the small fibrous bits and pieces that many of the ready-made preparations do, so the paste may in some cases be thin enough to pass through the syringe without needing to cut the tip off.

The Importance of Weight Checks – Weigh Daily!

It is another invaluable habit to weigh daily while your pig is unwell. Make sure you weigh at the same time each day (e.g. just before the first feed of the day); do so until your guinea is eating well for herself and is able to maintain her own weight. If your guinea is losing weight, then it's very likely that you are either not feeding enough, and/or not feeding often enough.

There are some medical conditions whereby no matter how much you syringe-feed, the guinea pig just won't maintain or gain any weight – such cases include endoparasitic problems (parasites inside the gut) and systemic mycosis (internal fungal infection, including oral), which usually will affect the absorption of nutrients through the gut wall. In such cases, treatment for the medical problem must be started quickly and you should continue with the syringe-feeding and medication until the guinea is able to maintain and/or gain weight by eating independently.

What do I feed my poorly pig?

There is a wide choice and a lot of opinion, it can be a little confusing what's "best". The important thing to bear in mind is that you must ensure the food contains a high level of



Vitamin C, and a very high percentage of fibre, to replicate the type of diet the animal's body is used to. This can be achieved by: buying a ready-made powdered preparation for herbivores; using a normal plain nugget feed for guinea pigs containing stabilised Vitamin C; or by grinding down dry feed and adding a Vitamin C supplement (dose: 100mg), mixing in a safe vegetable- or fruit-based baby food puree and/or adding wheat- or rye-grass powder. Tried and tested syringe-foods I can personally vouch for include:

- *Ready-made commercial preparations:*
 - Oxbow Critical Care / Critical Care Fine Grind;
 - Burgess Excel DualCare Recovery;
 - Supreme Science Recovery / Recovery Plus;
 - Galen's Garden Nutri Powder.
- *Regular guinea pig dry food (plain nuggets) **successfully used**:*
 - Burgess Excel Guinea Pig Tasty Nuggets – original flavour;
 - Burgess Excel Guinea Pig Tasty Nuggets – Blackcurrent & Oregano flavour;
 - Supreme Science Selective Guinea Pig nuggets;
 - Supreme Science Grain-Free Guinea Pig nuggets;
 - Harrington's Optimum Guinea Pig nuggets;
 - Woodlands Guinea Pig nuggets;
 - Oxbow Cavy Cuisine pellets.
- *Examples of safe fresh food purees to mix in (note that while sweet potato is safe for guinea pigs, you must still avoid all other potato):*

Apple, pear, banana, strawberries, blueberries, carrot, parsnip, peas, broccoli, sweetcorn, bell pepper, sweet potato.

Fruit-only purees may be used, but as they have a high sugar content and can be a little acidic, you don't want to feed it exclusively. As with the vegetable purees, fruit purees are best only used when mixed in with the fibre-rich syringe food. Do not feed any baby food containing potato, meat, onion, rhubarb or any other foods known to be toxic to piggies.

The technique for making a home-made mash with the guinea pig's plain nuggets is to place a small handful (10g) of nuggets into a bowl, pour enough boiled water over them to just cover all of them, and allow to soak and cool for 5-10 minutes. Then use a spoon to thoroughly mash the soggy nuggets, turning them into a paste that is usually smooth enough to go through some brands of 1ml syringe with the tip still on. Allow to cool before feeding to the guinea pig.



How much and how often should I syringe-feed?

It is agreed that it is most ideal to feed little and often – give smaller amounts more frequently rather than larger feeds infrequently; although it must be acknowledged that any food at all will make a difference to the pig, it is important to remember that the most benefit is achieved by feeding as “normally” as possible.

As your guinea pig will need feeding regularly, problems can arise when you have to go to work for anything longer than a 4+ hour day; in such cases, it is advisable to find someone experienced with syringe-feeding guineas to look after your guinea whilst you're at work.

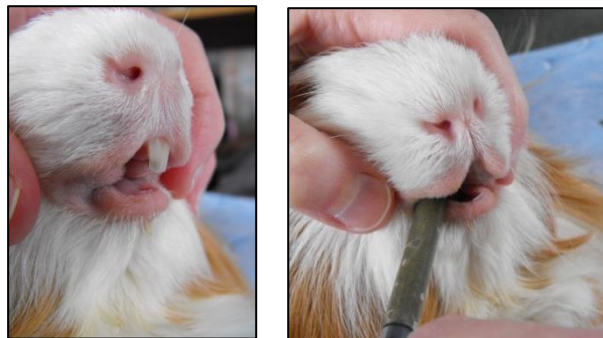
The specific minimum amount per feed does depend a little on how often you are feeding and if the pig is eating anything at all for herself, but as a general guideline you should be aiming for an absolute bare minimum 15ml per feed, ideally 20-30ml. Aim to feed every 3-4 hours at least, more often if feeding less each time, and include at least one overnight feed. You need to aim for an absolute daily minimum of 80ml; the ideal minimum is closer to 120ml, **but the key point to guide you on amount and frequency is that it must be enough to maintain the guinea's weight and to keep her defecating regularly.**

It is good to bear in mind that in order to maintain their strength and overcome illness, guinea pigs need sufficient amounts of food going in as regularly as possible.

The less food going in, the weaker the pig, the less likely a recovery.

How do I feed and how fast should I feed?

To get the food into your guinea, the syringe is inserted into the mouth via the *diastema* –the gap at the side of the mouth into the space behind the incisors - with the syringe pointing towards the fleshy cheek pads.



As a general rule, if the guinea pig stops chewing at any time then she stops swallowing, so do make **absolutely sure** she is swallowing the food and not just letting it build up in her mouth. It will soon spill out of her mouth if she is not swallowing it, so ensure you are giving her enough time to get through the amount you're feeding per mouthful. **If you do this and she refuses to swallow then it is vital to empty her mouth immediately to prevent aspiration.** For this reason, you should either feed as the pig takes the syringe for herself, and/or you should give only 0.3ml at a time and allow the pig to chew for *at least* 15-20 seconds or until you notice her mouth is empty, before feeding a little more.



Over time, when you become more experienced and confident at syringe-feeding, you will be able to reach a safe average rate of around 1ml per minute – but this will vary depending on the individual pig you are feeding and the condition they are in. Some pigs will require far more careful, slow feeding e.g. pigs with respiratory disease, while others will almost ‘drink’ all the food from the syringe and may get through as much as 30ml in as little as 10-15 minutes. The important thing to bear in mind is the circumstances and habits of the individual pig; **never try to give a feed too quickly**, but likewise try not to let a feed drag on for so long whereby you’re only managing 5ml over an hour or more.

What about water?

At this stage, syringing fluids (water) can also be mentioned. Fluids are important. Your guinea will be getting quite a lot of fluid from her syringe-food preparation, but syringing plain water is still important. It can help to alternate syringes or mouthfuls of food and water.

How do I finish a syringe-feed?

Oral hygiene is naturally of high importance while a guinea pig is not eating (and not drinking) for themselves. They are prone to letting uneaten food sit in the back of their mouth, breeding all manner of problems but typically leading to an oral fungal infection. Bacterial infections are also possible if dental overgrowth has been a problem, as the overgrown teeth frequently break the skin of the cheeks or tongue, leaving them highly vulnerable to infection. When you finish each feed, you need to empty the mouth of all food - it is usual to syringe a full 1ml or more back out of the mouth, but it is better to remove it than to let it rot in the guinea pig’s mouth between feeds. Once empty, give as much water as the guinea pig will allow – aim for a minimum of 3-5ml. Finish up with swabbing the mouth and cheeks carefully with a Q-tip (cotton bud).

A bad odour emitting from the mouth is an indicator of oral infection, as is white spots or a white coating of the oral cavity or tongue. If your guinea pig does develop an oral thrush infection, then your vet may prescribe *Nystatin* to be given 2-3x daily.

Any other tips for a guinea pig who isn’t eating?

Offering the syringe-food or softened nuggets in a bowl at all times, in addition to the actual syringe-feeds, is a worthwhile tip to remember. It’s reassuring to know that, when the pig’s appetite and ability creeps back in, she could figure out that she can help herself to some food that she is actually able to eat. Don’t let this method replace syringe-feeding though, unless she is able to maintain her weight herself by eating the soft food independently. Also remember to replace the bowl of softened food at least every 4-6 hours, with fresh softened nuggets in a clean bowl.

It should go without saying that you must always have plenty of hay on offer, along with water and normal dry food, and do keep trying to spark an appetite by offering different types of hay and fresh fruits and vegetables frequently throughout the day. Keep trying to spark an appetite and interest in food, as it is usually easier to recover and feed a guinea pig who still has an interest in food than one who is entirely apathetic.

A B-vitamin supplement can sometimes help to stimulate the appetite and give the animal a boost. The vet may also be able to offer a steroid injection (e.g. *Laurabolin*) that can be of great help.



How do I wean a guinea off syringe-feeds?

Most piggies will start eating for themselves as soon as they are able to do so comfortably. Some however will luxuriate in the ease of being fed by syringe, and this should be carefully monitored as you don't want her to be too reliant on you when it's no longer necessary.

When your pet has received a clean bill of health e.g. any illness has cleared, the teeth are the ideal length and growing in correctly, then it's time to "test the waters" a little – start reducing the amount you feed, first of all. Instead of giving 20ml every 3-4 hours, give 10ml every 3-4 hours instead. Stick with this for a couple of days; be sure to tempt her appetite as much as you can by providing all her normal foods and introducing new types of hay and, if you wish, consider supplementing with B-vitamins.

When you are attempting to encourage a much more normal way of eating, **weigh your guinea before every feed**. This way you can see if she has been able to maintain her weight in the time since her previous feed.

Once you are able to confirm she is eating something by herself, enough to maintain her weight between feeds, then you can work towards cutting the feeds down to just two a day; one in the morning, one in the evening. Continue to weigh daily until you know she's back to normal.

It should be said that some guineas will need syringe-feeding for many months, perhaps for the rest of their lives, due to chronic dental problems. After the initial dental difficulties have been addressed, and once these piggies are in better physical condition, they can often be sustained on two or three feeds per day in addition to their own attempts to eat soft or hard foods independently.

Quick Summary

For a guinea pig who is not eating anything at all:

- Feed every 3-4 hours.
- Minimum 15ml, ideal 20-30ml, per feed.
- Put the syringe in the mouth via the diastema – the gap at the side of the mouth into the space behind the incisors - and aim the syringe towards the fleshy cheek pads.
- 0.3ml per mouthful; do not try to put the full 1ml into the mouth at once, especially if the pig is not willingly taking the syringe.
- Allow 15-20 seconds for chewing and swallowing the food before giving more.
- Give small mouthfuls of water (0.2ml) at regular intervals or alternate syringes of food and water.
- Finish every feed by emptying the mouth, giving water and swabbing with a Q-tip (cotton bud) to prevent infection.
- Offer the syringe-food and/or soggy nuggets in a bowl at all times alongside their normal food. Refresh the soft food and fresh food at least 2-3 times daily.
- Consider B-vitamins/steroid injections from the vets.
- Weigh daily.





To wean a guinea off syringe-feeds:

- Offer less per feed e.g. 10ml instead of 20ml.
- Feed as frequently as normal at first.
- Weigh before every feed.
- Work towards feeding only twice a day; this can be two larger (20ml+) feeds if necessary.

A demonstration in person followed by taking on the responsibility of syringe-feeding a guinea pig yourself is usually the best way to learn how to syringe-feed. However, it is not impossible to teach yourself, and hands-on practice over time is the best way to learn and “perfect” your skill - but having someone show you how it’s done goes a long way when you’re taking the first steps on what can be, at times, a very stressful journey.

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