

Chinchilla and Degu Health Care

Many of the diseases we see in our rabbits and rodents are due to poor husbandry and nutrition. Providing proper nutrition and husbandry (cage setup and design, cleaning, temperature, and social structure) can prevent many

diseases of chinchillas and degus.

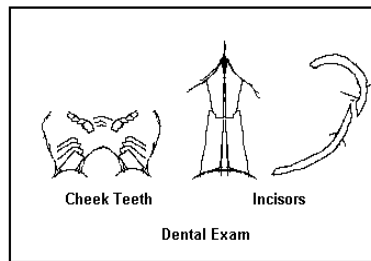
Unfortunately, chinchillas and degus are prey species and will try to hide illness. Regular veterinary visits are important for detecting underlying health

problems. Once you see that your animal is ill, it has probably been sick for some time. Do not wait to see a veterinarian. Many problems should be addressed immediately.

Dental Disease

In chinchillas and degus, all teeth are elodontic (the teeth are open-rooted and grow continuously throughout their life). These teeth serve an important function in that they can tear and shear grasses. Malocclusion of the cheek teeth (premolars and molars) is common in chinchillas as young as 3 and degus as young as 2. "Dental disease" includes abnormalities of the crowns (above the gum line), roots (below the gum line), gingiva, and cheek mucosa. Dental malocclusion can occur due to poor diet, shape of the head and jaw, and poor breeding.

Molar malocclusion leads to abnormal wear and sharp, painful points on the teeth that can penetrate the soft tissues of the mouth, such as the



roof, cheek, or tongue, causing painful lacerations. In addition, the tooth roots can overgrow and penetrate the jawbone causing extreme pain. Affected chinchillas and degus will exhibit reduced appetite, weight loss, drooling, inability to eat (picks up the food and then drops it), swelling of the face or jaw, nasal and/or eye discharge and other signs of pain.

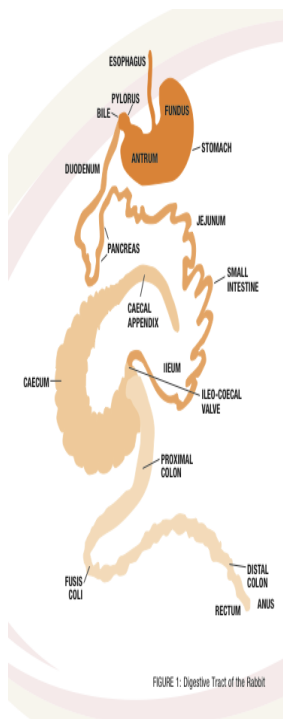
Incisor malocclusion occurs as a result of trauma or secondary to molar malocclusion. With incisor malocclusion, the upper incisors curve backwards into the roof of the mouth and the

lower incisors will grow upwards. Incisor malocclusion can also occur with similar signs.

If your chinchilla or degu is exhibiting any of the signs listed above, we recommend you see your vet **immediately**. Your veterinarian may recommend skull radiographs in order to fully evaluate the extent of the dental disease. Treatment of malocclusion usually requires trimming/filing the affected teeth under anesthesia. Additional treatment may include antibiotics, pain relief, fluids and nutritional support. There is no permanent solution for this problem. Regular rechecks are required to prevent reoccurrence and periodic trimming/filing is usually necessary.

Gastrointestinal Disease

Rabbits and rodents with anorexia or reduced feces should be seen by a veterinarian immediately.



The gastrointestinal tract is unique in rabbits and rodents. Diseases of the gastrointestinal tract are common and have been associated with infectious diseases, parasites, toxins, and neoplasia. The cause of gastrointestinal disease can be multifactorial, including dental malocclusion, inappropriate husbandry, inappropriate diet, sudden diet changes, poor hygiene, antibiotics, and stress.

Rabbits and rodents are strict herbivores and their gastrointestinal tract has some obvious differences with the gastrointestinal tract of carnivores and omnivores. The first obvious difference is their teeth, as discussed in the section on dental disease. The esophagus, stomach (monogastric) and small intestine are similar to that in other animals. However, the large intestine is very different. Rabbits and rodents are hindgut fermenters and depend on their large intestine for digesting cellulose into volatile fatty acids and resorbing water. The microbial population of the large intestine is primarily comprised of anaerobes. Any changes in this delicate microflora population can have devastating effects.

A chinchilla or degu will lose its appetite for a variety of

reasons. The most common cause is pain. While dental disease (discussed separately) and gastrointestinal (GI) diseases are the most common causes of pain, pain anywhere in the body can be associated with decreased appetite or complete loss of appetite (anorexia). Other conditions that can lead to anorexia include bladder and kidney infections, uterine infections, abscesses, respiratory infections, inner and middle ear infections, strokes, parasitic diseases, stress and toxin exposure.

The problem is primarily a GI *motility* disorder, which is common in all of the hindgut fermenters. A high fiber diet is essential to the health of the GI tract. A low fiber diet, small particle diet (pellets as an exclusive diet), excessive carbohydrates (fruits, nuts, and grains), reduced water intake, lack of exercise, or any medical condition that causes the animal to eat or drink less may result in reduced motility of the GI tract. When this happens, the stomach contents become dehydrated and compact. Reduced GI motility also leads to accumulation of gas and toxins and can start to compromise the blood flow to the intestinal tract. The less the chinchilla or degu eats or drinks, the more compacted the contents

become until the animal stops eating entirely and the problem escalates.

Enterotoxemia (bacteria-producing toxins that enter the blood stream) due to dysbiosis (changes in the delicate microflora population) is a common result of GI stasis. Clinical signs are as described, but can also cause diarrhea and death.

Since rabbits and rodents cannot vomit, affected animals will exhibit anorexia, weight loss, reduction in stool volume and numbers, and abdominal pain. A rabbit or rodent with these signs should be seen by your veterinarian **immediately**. Rabbits and rodents will deteriorate rapidly when they go without food for extended periods of time. Early diagnosis and treatment is essential to saving your pet's life.

Your veterinarian may require radiographs and blood work to efficiently evaluate the chinchilla's or degu's condition. Medical therapy may include fluid therapy, forced feedings, medications to stimulate GI motility, and pain relief. Depending on the severity of the disease, your chinchilla or degu may need to stay in the hospital for treatments until its condition is stabilized.

Heat Stress

Chinchillas come from the cool, dry regions of the Andes Mountains. Prolonged exposure to temperatures above 80 degrees can result in heat stress. High humidity can also contribute to heat stress. Signs of heat stress include recumbency, panting, drooling, pale or blue mucosa, hyperthermia, and death. Seek veterinary help **immediately**.

Treatment of heat stress includes fluid therapy and various medications to reduce the animal's temperature and treat shock. The chinchilla may develop GI stasis and secondary infections and may require hospitalization.

Prevention is easy. Keep the chinchilla in a cool dry area (65-75 degrees). Prevent

prolonged exposure to heat and humidity and direct sunlight.



Upper Respiratory Infections

Pneumonia and other respiratory infections, caused by *Bordetella*, *Streptococcus*, *Pasteurella*, and *Pseudomonas*, are not uncommon in chinchillas and degus. They can occur as a result of overcrowding, stress, poor husbandry.

Clinical signs include ocular or

nasal discharge, sneezing, wheezing, dyspnea (difficulty breathing), anorexia, and pyrexia (fever).

Occasionally, middle or inner ear infections accompany respiratory disease in chinchillas and degus. Additional signs would include incoordination, head tilt,

circling to one side, and rolling. Your veterinarian may require blood work and/or radiographs to fully evaluate the condition of your chinchilla or degu. Treatment includes aggressive antibiotic therapy and supportive care.



Diabetes Mellitus

Degus can develop spontaneous diabetes mellitus with islet amyloidosis. Amyloid is an abnormal protein produced in the bone marrow and then deposited in various organs. In this case, it gets deposited in the islet cells of the pancreas interfering with insulin production.

Clinical signs include increased drinking, increased

urination, and cataracts. There is no treatment for diabetes in degus. However, eliminating fruit, seeds, and treats (high sugars and starches) from the diet can help reduce the incidence of diabetes.

Obesity and fatty liver disease can be associated with diabetes and are due to a high fat and carbohydrate diet (seeds, fruits, and

treats). Both degus and chinchillas are prone to obesity and fatty liver disease if over fed. Feeding a well-balanced diet high in fiber and low in carbohydrates and fat will help prevent these diseases and keep your degu and chinchilla healthy.



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Skin Diseases

Hair loss or thinning can occur for a number of reasons. Barbering, fungal infections, and fur slip can all cause hair loss in degus and chinchillas.

Barbering is caused when one animal is chewing the hair of another that is lower in the social pecking order. The only treatment for barbering is to separate the animals.

Fungal infections, such as ringworm, are a common skin disease in chinchilla. In addition to hair loss, the clinical signs include scabbing, flaking, pruritus (itching) and reddening of the skin on the nose, ears, and feet. Ringworm is diagnosed by culture and

treated with oral antifungals.

All litter and porous furniture (wood, paper) should be discarded. The cage and furniture should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected and fresh bedding given weekly during treatment.

Fur slip is a condition that occurs when chinchillas and degus are handled roughly. Large clumps of fur come out with relative ease. This is a defensive mechanism that allows the animal to escape from predators. The hair generally grows back without difficulty, but it

may take several months.

Penile hair rings occur usually in breeding chinchillas. The hair is woven into a string and encircles the penis. This results in disruption of circulation. The penis swells and eventually becomes necrotic. Signs include constant licking in the perianal area, trouble urinating, and depression. Diagnosis is based on direct visualization. Treatment involves removal of the ring of hair, topical and systemic antibiotic therapy, and breeding rest.



Our Mission

All Creatures Animal Hospital is dedicated to providing progressive medicine in a caring environment for pets of all species. Through preventative medicine, client education, professional development of our staff, and advanced medical and surgical techniques, we hope to foster a strong and lasting bond with clients and their pets.