



## Guinea Pig Helpline Factsheet

## Heatstroke in Guinea Pigs

### Prevention, Symptoms & Treatment

Guinea pigs are unable to pant or sweat, and as a species are particularly sensitive to changes in temperature; as such heatstroke is a very serious concern when the temperatures start climbing. Anything past 20°C is considered on the warmer side and as a responsible owner you should be aware and prepared to protect your animals from heatstroke, and you must also be aware of the key symptoms and treatments as time is of the essence for animals affected.

#### Prevention

The advice on this Factsheet applies to **all** guinea pigs regardless of whether they live indoors or outdoors. The tips for prevention are divided into categories for ease of reference.

#### **Housing**

- Temperatures in wooden hutches and sheds can rise by an additional 8-10 degrees in those non-air conditioned and inadequately-ventilated hutches and sheds. Consider installing suitable air-conditioning to your shed, ensure it is safely but well ventilated, and ensure any hutches are placed in the coolest possible area in the shade.
- Indoor cages with plastic walls should be replaced with wire-walled cages, or the pigs allowed free-range in a safe area during the warmest weather.

#### **Bedding and cosies**

- If using fleece or Vetbed, ensure the cage is very well ventilated, and you must be absolutely certain that they cannot burrow underneath the bedding.
- Lighter beddings like a thin covering of hay-and-newspaper, or flax bedding, may be slightly cooler for pigs.
- Cosy toys like cuddlecups, cosy sacks etc. should not be used in warm weather.

#### **Hideys**

- **Remove all plastic igloos** ("pigloos") and any enclosed plastic hideys during warmer weather, as heat rises significantly within these. Instead use plastic step-stools, which have open walls and are not fully enclosed.

#### **Travelling**

- For any piggies travelling anywhere in warmer weather, a larger (cat-sized) carrier is preferable to the guinea pig-sized carriers. A larger carrier will allow for more ventilation and breathing space which will prevent heat building up as severely.

#### **Grazing duties (time outdoors)**

- If your pigs are to go out on the grass for grazing duties, **do not put them out during the day**; stick with early morning (before 7-8am) before the temperature climbs too sharply, or wait until the evening (after 7-8pm) when it is significantly cooler.

- Cover the vast majority of the run with large towels to **provide as much shade as possible**. Remember that the sun moves throughout the day, so move the towel to provide shade accordingly.

### Hydration

- Ensure all water is fresh, clean and constantly available. Ideally you need to provide one bottle per guinea pig, and of course ensure that all are working. Leaking bottles should be replaced with ones that do not leak. Empty and refill all water bottles at least 2x daily in warm weather. Clean inside the bottle and especially the spout every day, as bacterial and fungal growth is rapid in warm weather and can affect the taste of the water.
- Giving piggies a shallow dish of ice to lick sometimes helps keep them cool (apply a little water before offering to piggies to prevent sticking to the ice). This should not be confused with feeding frozen foods – licking ice is much different to eating ice, and much different to feeding frozen foods. Ensure the guinea pig cannot eat the ice as this may pose a choking hazard; a shallow dish with frozen water in it is preferable as it cannot be picked up and eaten. I do not condone feeding frozen foods.
- Feeding all fresh fruits and veggies when they are still wet can be helpful, and the offering of fresh foods with a high water content – e.g. cucumber, melon - can also be given more often (but do not increase the amount too much, as this could upset the digestion).

### Long-haired piggies

- Those with long haired guinea pigs should consider have their coat **thinned out and trimmed** to help keep these pigs cool; many breeds like Sheltie and Texel can have very thick, heavy coats which can be useful in winter, but potentially a threat in warmer weather.  
*(The photo shows Kingslie, my coronet boar, after being clipped to a coat length of one inch prior to a heatwave with predicted 32°C temperatures.)*



### Cooling the room/cage

- Fans can help to keep the air circulating around the room. While they don't necessarily cool the air, this circulation of air helps to prevent the heat becoming quite as stifling. Don't aim them directly at your guinea pigs, especially if the fan is close to the cage; position any fans just outside the cages pointing slightly away from the cage itself, or if pointing slightly towards the cage, at least a few feet away.
- If you have an air-conditioning unit where the piggies are kept, this is ideal for preventing heatstroke, but check that the temperature remains steady and not too low for the piggies.

- Tiles and bricks, or specially designed “ice-pods”, can be stored in the fridge or freezer and placed in the piggies cage for them to lay on in warmer weather. They won’t stay cold for too long though, so ensure you have enough to provide a steady supply of cool tiles for them.
- Drape damp cool towels over small areas of the cage. Sometimes towels can be hung on the walls of the cage; sensibly sized and carefully placed, they will not interfere with ventilation, allowing some piggies to enjoy laying against the cool towels. The towels should not be dripping wet and should not be placed in front of a fan.

### **Heatstroke Symptoms**

Symptoms include:

- Collapse (e.g. limp, weak, floppy, lethargic, unable to stand);
- Drooling;
- Rapid breathing or reverse shallow jerky breathing;
- Eyes sunken, sometimes even closed;
- Lips/mouth/feet can be blue tinged.

In rare cases, but it has been seen, the animal may begin to seize.

### **Immediate Treatment**

- Immediately bring the animal indoors/move to a cooler area of the house.
- **Soak tea towels in cool water**, wring lightly to remove some of the water, then **wrap the pig in them**. Keep changing the towels keeping them cool; continue with this until the animal begins to show signs of recovery e.g. regaining strength from their state of collapse, ears not feeling as violently hot, breathing calmer. Stop wrapping the pig in towels when he is adequately cooled down; to continue cooling him for too long risks respiratory issues.
- A delicate dab of **Vicks Vaporub** on the end of the nose, or Vicks placed nearby, can help ease laboured breathing.

### **Vital notes to remember:**

- **NEVER** immerse the guinea pig in cold water nor put a shower or hose on them - this can induce a fatal heart attack due to shock. It is essential to cool the pig gently.
- **DO NOT** attempt to syringe fluids into the animal; in almost all heatstroke victims there will be lung involvement i.e. fluid on the lungs and the piggie is likely to be too weak to swallow. To force fluids orally could aspirate the pig and lead to infection or pneumonia.

### **Veterinary Treatment**

Following the above advice for immediate treatment, you should then at the earliest opportunity get the pig to a vet, where the expected treatment should be:-

- **Subcutaneous (injected) fluids**. 10ml given at shoulder, and ideally this should be repeated 3 more times over a twelve hour period (i.e. every 3-4 hours).
- **Subcutaneous dose of diuretic** (e.g. Furosemide/Frusol/Dimazon/Lasix) at shoulder.

### **Ongoing Treatment**

- Continue giving copious amounts of fluids for several days after the heatstroke collapse. Keeping the guinea well hydrated is very important, as heatstroke can cause renal issues as a result of the dehydration that heatstroke involves. Plain water that is carefully syringed orally is acceptable, but it is more beneficial to add **Dioralyte** (any flavour) to the water being syringed. Aim to syringe fluids every 2 hours, especially if the weather remains warm.

- **Diuretic** therapy may in severe cases need to be continued orally for 1-2 days. If there are problems with fluid in the lungs beyond this, the possibility of a respiratory infection or congestive heart problems need to be investigated urgently.