

Diagnosis and Clinical Management of Gastrointestinal Conditions in Exotic Companion Mammals (Rabbits, Guinea Pigs, and Chinchillas)

Tracey K. Ritzman, DVM, DABVP (Avian & Exotic Companion Mammal)

KEYWORDS

- Gastroenterology • Exotic companion mammal • Rabbits • Guinea pigs
- Chinchillas • Ileus • Prokinetic therapy

KEY POINTS

- Presenting clinical signs of gastrointestinal disease in exotic companion mammals can vary widely.
- Small herbivores require specific dietary support and therapeutic treatments.
- Ileus is a common clinical condition and can be a primary or secondary disease.
- Common components of treatment of ileus include fluid therapy, pain relief, nutritional support, and prokinetic therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Presentation and clinical signs of gastrointestinal disease in exotic companion mammals are often nonspecific and varied. In this article, the diagnosis and clinical management (therapeutics) of gastrointestinal conditions in select exotic companion mammals are reviewed. The herbivore patient discussed includes rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas.

Affected patients with gastrointestinal disorder may be asymptomatic, have nonspecific clinical changes, or may present with obvious abdominal complaints. A thorough physical examination should be performed on every exotic mammal patient as part of the medical evaluation. A detailed anamnesis aids the clinician in creating a differential diagnosis. The patient with gastrointestinal illness may have clinical signs such as change in character or frequency of stool production, change in appetite, tachypnea secondary to gastrointestinal enlargement or pain, change in posture or

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E-mail address: tritzman@chfa.net

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activity, bruxism, vomiting (some species), diarrhea, melena, or general malaise. Diarrhea should be characterized as acute or chronic, and if possible, as small bowel or large bowel in origin. Large bowel diarrhea is often characterized by increased mucus or frank blood in the stool. Dental disease should be considered in patients having difficulty prehending or chewing food, displaying a change in dietary preferences, or showing a generalized decreased appetite.

DIAGNOSIS OF GASTROINTESTINAL DISEASE

A presumptive diagnosis of gastrointestinal disease can often be obtained from the history, physical examination, and initial diagnostics. Differential diagnoses for a gastrointestinal condition depend on the species, symptoms, and diagnostic findings. Noninvasive and often initial diagnostics that can be used for the diagnosis of gastrointestinal disease include hematology, chemistry and electrolyte testing, blood gas analysis, imaging (radiography or ultrasonography), fecal parasite testing, fecal direct, fecal Gram stain, or fecal bacterial culture and sensitivity testing.

Sedation or brief general anesthesia is often necessary in the exotic companion mammal patient for the clinician to safely and efficiently perform a thorough oral examination. Sedation or brief general anesthesia may also be necessary to obtain blood samples and diagnostic quality imaging. More advanced testing for the diagnosis of gastrointestinal conditions in small mammals can include endoscopic examination of the oral cavity to evaluate the teeth and soft tissues of the mouth, esophagus, stomach, or proximal small intestinal tract. Other diagnostic options, which are more invasive, include endoscopic biopsies, surgical exploration and evaluation, or surgical biopsies of the gastrointestinal system or associated internal organs (liver, gallbladder, pancreas). Asymptomatic lesions may be discovered incidentally during survey radiography or during other abdominal imaging studies, such as ultrasonography.

Imaging is an essential diagnostic tool for the veterinary clinician working with exotic companion mammals. With the advancement of imaging and the availability of digital radiography systems, the detail obtained can be excellent. Imaging options available for exotic companion mammals include radiography, ultrasonography, computed tomography (CT), or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Initial imaging usually includes radiography or ultrasonography, because CT and MRI are inherently more expensive tests and are not available at most veterinary clinics. For initial assessment, whole-body ventrodorsal and lateral views should be taken to allow for evaluation of the entire thorax and abdomen, including liver, gastrointestinal tract, reproductive organs, and urinary system. If dental disease is suspected, skull or dental radiographs may also be indicated. Cost and accessibility of the more sophisticated imaging options may be limiting factors with veterinary patients.

For all species discussed in this article, the stomach is normally located in the left cranial quadrant of the abdomen. With imaging, the size, positioning, and contents of the stomach should be evaluated. The intestinal tract can be examined for luminal size, position within the abdomen, wall thickness, and pattern. If dilation or plication is noticed within the intestinal tract, the clinician should consider obstruction or foreign body disease in the differential for the patient. Intestinal obstructive disease may lead to dilation of the intestine proximal to the obstruction. With obstructive disease, the loops of bowel are often greater than twice the width of lumbar vertebrae number 2 (L2) on imaging.¹ Gastric outflow obstruction may be indicated with imaging if the stomach is distended. Because rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas are unable to vomit, gastric dilation can occur rapidly. Gastric dilation and torsion have been documented in guinea pigs.² Torsion of the root of the mesentery can also occur in guinea

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