

Gut Stasis in Rabbits

Rabbits have a digestive system that needs to be constantly moving to ensure food and liquid are passed effectively from the mouth to the bottom. One very serious but common health problem seen in rabbits is gut stasis (sometimes called ileus). This is not actually a disease, but a symptom that can indicate illness, pain or stress. It is characterised by a reduction in the normal movement of the stomach and intestines leading to partial or complete loss of appetite and decreased poo production. Any stools that are produced are often smaller, drier and darker in appearance. They are sometimes stuck together by fur. Rabbits will often hide away and not come out for food or even treats when offered. The slowing down of the gut can lead to an imbalance and overgrowth of bacteria within the gut, resulting in toxin and gas production, which can make your rabbit feel worse. Sadly, gut stasis can be fatal within 24 -48 hours if left untreated.

Causes

- Inappropriate diet – insufficient hay or grass, muesli-based diets, inappropriate or excessive treats.
- Stress factors – loss of a mate, presence of predators, fireworks or thunder, building work, cold weather, change in routine, injury, vet visits.
- Pain – dental disease, arthritis, urine scald, flystrike.
- Gut obstruction – hairballs, bedding, fabric, undigestible plants (e.g. bamboo).
- Lack of exercise.
- Obesity.
- Underlying illness – appendicitis, liver disease, kidney disease.
- Anaesthesia or surgery.

Signs

- Reduced or absent faecal pellets (the average rabbit passes 200-300 poos daily).
- Reduced appetite or complete lack of food intake.
- Lethargy, reluctance to move, hiding away.
- Hunched or tense posture.
- Flopping to try and find a comfortable position.
- Tooth grinding.
- Lack of grooming resulting in clumped or matted hair.
- Laboured breathing.

Complications

- Severe dehydration.
- Electrolyte imbalances.
- Bloating due to the build-up of liquid and gas.
- Damage to the gut lining due to the secretion of gastric acid that causes ulceration.
- Weakness.
- Shock.
- Risk of fatality.

Investigation

The diagnosis of gut stasis is based on clinical signs and a physical examination. An assessment of the severity involves getting accurate information on the duration of signs and checking body temperature and blood glucose levels. In mild cases, we may not perform any further investigations as these cases should respond rapidly to treatment. However, in some cases, the cause of stasis may be more serious and life-threatening (such as a gut obstruction) or chronic resulting in recurrent gut stasis. These cases should be investigated to identify the trigger so more specific treatment can be implemented.

Physical examination:

- Examination of mouth to check for overlong teeth, sharp points on the teeth and/or damage to the tongue and cheeks.
- Examination of the haircoat for matting, hair loss, scale or sores.
- Assessment of the gait and mobility.
- Palpation of the tummy to feel for abnormalities.
- Use of a stethoscope to check for normal gut sounds.
- Checking body temperature.

Blood tests:

- Blood glucose measurement to assess severity and monitor treatment response.
- Assessment for the underlying cause by checking kidney and liver markers.

Imaging:

- X-rays and ultrasound.

Referral for specialist care.

Management

Gut stasis should always be treated with urgency, so the first step is to present to a veterinary surgeon as soon as possible for assessment. If an underlying cause is identified, then specific treatment for that condition can be started. However, if the cause is not obvious, we need to initiate treatment for gut stasis whilst we perform further investigations into the cause.

The treatment of gut stasis revolves around symptomatic care, as well as any necessary treatments for the underlying cause. Some rabbits will recover in as little as 24 hours, while others may take several days to over a week to fully recover. In mild cases, rabbits can be managed at home but in more severe cases, hospitalisation is required.

Treatment:

- Nutritional support through syringe feeding a liquid diet.
- Rehydration by syringe feeding or the administration of fluid under the skin or through a drip into the bloodstream.
- Pain relief.
- Medications to stimulate gut motility.

Prevention

Unfortunately, gut stasis is not completely preventable because there are so many factors that can contribute to its development. However, there are some pointers that can significantly reduce the risk of this condition for many rabbits.

Diet:

- Ensure your rabbits have constant access to an appropriate diet – fibre is key!
- The diet should be made up of:
 - 85-90% high-quality hay or grass.
 - 10% fresh leafy greens.
 - 5% pelleted food (1 egg cup per kilogram of body weight).
 - Treats should only be given on occasion. The ideal treats are fresh and dried herbs. Seed based treats should never be fed.
- If your rabbit is not eating enough grass and hay, the only way to get them to eat more is to cut back on the pellets, greens and treats. This is because rabbits have evolved to seek out the higher calorie foodstuffs first, so will preferentially eat greens, vegetables, pellets and treats before eating the healthier grass and hay.
- The timing of feeding will also encourage grass and hay intake. Avoid feeding greens, vegetables or pellets first thing in the morning as they will always eat this first. Instead, offer fresh grass or hay in the morning when they are hungry. Greens and pellets can then be offered later in the day, and it is even better to hide these around the run to encourage exercise and foraging.
- Consider a fibre-dense supplement like Protexin Pro-Fibre or fibre-dense treats like Selective Naturals Fibafirst for rabbits that have difficulty eating grass and hay.
- Free access to water is essential, particularly in the hotter weather. Rabbits consume a lot more water than dogs and cats on a per weight basis and can easily become dehydrated. We recommend using both bowls and a dripper bottle so they can choose.
- Water bowls should be filled to the brim. They should also be large and heavy (ceramic bowls work well) to prevent them being flipped over.

Exercise:

- Exercise is a great way to prevent obesity and promote gut movement.
- If your rabbit has a hutch and a run, it is preferable to have them joined together to allow for exercise at any time.
- Some rabbits can need a little encouragement to move around so consider using tunnels, puzzles and toys.

Brushing:

- Rabbits shed their undercoat during the moulting season. This results in increased grooming, and possibly the ingestion of lots of hair. Sadly, this can cause gut stasis or even obstruction.
- Certain breeds will be at higher risk like Lion-heads, Angoras and Rex rabbits.
- Brushing your rabbits daily can significantly reduce the ingestion of hair. For those that don't like being brushed, use a glove type brush or Furminator and combine brushing with feeding time so it is more readily accepted.
- Furball pastes can also be used to help with the passage of hair.

Stress:

- Reduce stressors as much as possible.
- If the stress is unavoidable, increase the consumption of hay and grass for several days prior to the stressful event. One of the best ways to increase hay and grass intake is to cut back on pelleted foods, leafy greens and treats.

Pain:

- Pain can be difficult to identify in rabbits because they are a prey species and have evolved to hide the signs of pain or weakness.
- However, older rabbits can develop arthritis and sometimes it is necessary to perform a pain-relief trial to check for this.
- In cases where pain is expected, for example following an injury or surgery, providing good pain relief is a must.

Obesity:

- Preventing obesity is a fantastic way to reduce the risk of gut stasis, as well as arthritis and other painful conditions like urine scald and flystrike.
- The best way is to get your rabbits to eat more hay and grass using the tips discussed above.

Syringe feeding

We typically recommend having a syringe feeding product on hand such as [Oxbow Critical Care for Herbivores](#) or [Science Selective Recovery Plus](#). If you notice mild symptoms of stasis beginning, you can attempt to syringe feed at home. For some rabbits, syringe feeding at home is all that is needed to help avoid a full-blown stasis event. You should continue to offer good quality hay, the normal selection of pellets and fresh greens as this will hopefully encourage voluntary food intake.

The syringe foods come in a powder formulation and should be mixed with warm water (according to the manufacturer guidelines) to create a fibrous paste that can be administered into the mouth via a syringe. You can also offer this food in a food bowl. To syringe feed, you may need to wrap your rabbit in a towel or blanket, then gently insert the syringe into the side of the mouth (in the gap between the incisor teeth and molar teeth). The food can be slowly syringed into the mouth, then wait for your rabbit to chew and swallow before administering any more. Continue until your rabbit is no longer interested in swallowing the food, they drop the food out of the mouth, or they try to avoid the syringe. Fresh syringe food should be prepared every 12 hours. Check your rabbit every 2-4 hours to see if they are eating their usual food and whether they have passed any faecal pellets. If not, repeat the syringe feeding.

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