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Treating and preventing gut stasis in rabbits

Rabbits have a digestive system that is completely different to that of a dog, cat or person. Rabbits digest their food in a very similar way to horses - bacteria in the gut break down the nutrients in the grass and hay and the entire digestive system depends on the constant movement of fibrous food through the intestines.

One very serious but common health problem seen in rabbits is gastrointestinal stasis (gut stasis). This condition occurs when the digestive system slows down or stops completely.

When this happens, the loops of intestine fill up with gas and fluid, causing very painful bloating. This pain makes the rabbit unwilling to eat, but this worsens the problem as the gut becomes more and more static, the rabbit becomes dehydrated and undernourished, and the bacterial population inside the digestive system is disrupted. The abnormal bacterial population inside the digestive system may go on to produce toxins that worsen the rabbit's condition further. Sadly, the condition can often be fatal.

What causes gut stasis?

The initial slowing of the digestive system can be caused by:

- Inadequate diet (low fibre)
- Pain (e.g. from dental disease or other illnesses)
- Stress (e.g. change in environment, fireworks, presence of predators, loss of a mate)
- Anaesthesia/ surgery
- Viral infection

What are the signs of gut stasis?

- Reduced appetite
- Small and/or abnormal droppings
- Tooth grinding
- Reduced activity / looking depressed / hunched posture

Treatment of gut stasis

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Gut stasis should always be treated seriously and treatment started as soon as possible. Sometimes there is an obvious underlying cause but often there is not and in these rabbits it is best to treat the gut stasis in the usual way first, and then start investigating for an underlying problem if the rabbit doesn't improve as expected.

Treatment may include:

- Syringe feeding of a fibrous food replacement
- Pain relief
- Fluid replacement (this may be through a drip, or by injection under the skin)
- Medication to encourage the gut to contract and move along properly

Prevention of gut stasis

It is best to be proactive in situations where your rabbit is at risk of developing gut stasis. This involves providing good pain relief to rabbits that have had injuries or surgery, syringe feeding any rabbit with a temporary drop in appetite (particularly rabbits as they recover from surgery), and ensuring that all rabbits have constant access to high quality hay and protection from environmental stress such as extreme temperatures and threat from predators.

Further information on syringe feeding

Rabbits with gut stasis, or those at risk of developing it need to have their food intake monitored closely and any reduction in food intake needs to be replaced with syringe feeding.

Continue to provide your rabbit with access to a plentiful supply of good quality hay and his/her usual selection of pellets and fresh veg as the more your rabbit eats on his/her own, the better.

When you are syringe feeding, you will need to use a preparation known as 'critical care' formula - a special diet powder designed to be mixed with warm water to create a fibrous paste that can be syringe fed.

- Mix up the critical care with some warm water (use a ratio of 1 part powder to 2 parts water; for fine grind critical care)

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- Draw up into a 3ml syringe. It is usually easier to remove the plunger and scoop the critical care into the large end of the syringe, then replace the plunger.
- Wrap your rabbit in a towel or blanket with his/her head facing away from you. Gently insert the syringe into the side of the mouth, in the gap between the long incisor teeth and the molars at the back of your rabbits mouth.
- Slowly press the plunger to squeeze a small amount of food into your rabbit's mouth. Wait for him/her to manipulate the food and swallow it then squeeze a little more in.
- Continue until your rabbit is no longer interested in swallowing the food (tries to avoid the syringe or just lets the food drop out of the other side of his/her mouth)
- Check your rabbit every 2-4 hours to see if they are eating their usual food. If not, repeat the syringe feeding. We suggest checking and feeding every 2 - 4 hours (Perhaps every 2 hours during the day, but every four hours overnight). If your rabbit finds handling and feeding stressful, you may decide to feed less often (every 6 hours, minimum) although this is not as advantageous for gut function.

Monitoring progress

At home you can check that your pet is eating more and more on his/her own, is producing a normal amount and type of droppings, and is active and comfortable.

Your vet will ask you to bring your pet to a check-up appointment. Your vet will check progress by feeling your pet's abdomen, checking his/her weight and asking you about your pet's progress at home.

Your pets weighs kg

Rabbits require 50ml of critical care per kilo of rabbit, per day. If your pet was eating nothing else, he/she would need _____ ml of critical care every 24hrs.

Please bring your pet for a recheck on _____

Additional medication

Your pet has also been prescribed the following medication:

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Treatment at home or at the surgery?

If possible, it is best to carry out this supportive treatment for your rabbit at home. This is because it is much less stressful for rabbits to stay in their usual environment and with their usual companions. It is also less expensive! Intensive hospitalisation with round-the-clock syringe feeding is charged at £97 per night (any additional injections or medications are charged for separately). We suggest that rabbits having routine surgery (neutering, dental treatment) go home the same evening to be syringe fed at home and then brought for a free of charge check the next day. If you prefer for your rabbit to receive this care at the surgery we are happy to carry this out, but please be advised that the £97 charge will apply.

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