

REDUCING THE RISK OF GUT STASIS IN RABBITS

Gut stasis (sometimes called ileus) is the most common reason that rabbits are presented to our hospital. It is not actually a disease but rather a symptom or sign that can indicate illness, pain or stress. It is characterised by a reduction in the normal movement of the stomach and intestines (reduced peristalsis) and leads to partial or complete loss of appetite and decreased poo production. Any poo pellets that are produced are often smaller, dryer and darker in appearance and sometimes strung together with fur. Rabbits will often hide away from owners and not come out for food or treats when offered. If you notice any of these signs please contact us for advice.

The role of the veterinary team when presented with a rabbit in gut stasis is to give nutritional support, pain relief and other medications to manage the condition and to perform tests such as x-rays, CT scans and blood tests to investigate the underlying cause. If an underlying cause is identified, then specific treatment for that condition can also be started. Most cases of gut stasis are mild and the underlying cause is not investigated as they respond rapidly to treatment. In some cases, the cause of stasis may be more serious such as a complete blockage of the gut which is life threatening. These cases require rapid intervention.

Many rabbits present with repeated bouts of gut stasis throughout their lives. Some underlying causes of gut stasis are avoidable and this handout is designed to help owners implement prevention strategies which will reduce the risk of this disease developing in your pet.

OBESITY

Obesity is one of the most common contributory factors for gut stasis in rabbits. One of the reasons veterinary surgeons and nurses are so keen to ensure your rabbit is not overweight is to reduce the risk of gut stasis as well as arthritis and other painful conditions like flystrike and urine scald. The best way to treat/prevent obesity is to get rabbits to eat more hay and grass. The problem is that rabbits have evolved to go for the high calorie stuff first so they will preferentially eat pellets, fruit, vegetables and treats before healthier grass and hay. The best way to encourage hay and grass eating is to cut back on those other items. Fruit and vegetables high in carbohydrates such as carrots can be a significant cause of weight gain and should only be fed occasionally. Treats that are seed based should never be fed.

We know how much rabbits are motivated by food and we all want to spoil our pets. There are ways you can continue to give treats without risking creating an obese bunny! Choosing treats wisely such as fresh and dried herbs and grasses are much better for your rabbit and they love them! Timing the feeding of treats carefully and encouraging foraging can also help to prevent obesity (see later).

One of the most important ways to prevent obesity is to be able to recognise it. The Pet Food Manufacturers Association has a fantastic chart to help you with this called a [rabbit size-o-meter](#). Please feel free to discuss this with one of the team during an appointment as prevention is always better than cure. We also run weight clinics if your bunny needs a little help.

BRUSHING

During the moulting season – which seems to be all year round in some rabbits! – your rabbit will be shedding their old undercoat and grooming themselves and companions which leads to the ingestion of a lot of hair. This transits through the gut and can often be seen linking their poo pellets together. Large amounts of hair can lead to stasis or life threatening blockages. In fact, hair is THE most common cause of death due to gut blockages in rabbits. This is not a problem in wild rabbits but domesticated rabbits have been bred to have much longer coats. Breeds such as lion-heads, angoras and rex rabbits are all at higher risk of problems but many cross breed rabbits have much longer coats than their wild type cousins. Brushing your rabbits daily can significantly reduce this risk. For those who do not like being brushed choose a glove type brush or a Furminator which are very effective and combine their brushing with feeding time and they will accept it more readily. Fur ball pastes used in cats can also be given to rabbits to help with the passage of hair.

FIBRE and DIET

The type of food you feed your rabbit can have a huge impact on gut movement too – not just due to obesity. Foods such as grass and hay have a certain kind of fibre called ‘indigestible fibre’ which when eaten, cause the release of hormones which promote normal gut movement. This has a profound and important effect on gut health. Be careful though, because not all ‘fibre’ is the same. The fibre listed on some food packets refers to a different type of fibre which does not help with stasis. If your rabbit is obese or if it is moulting, increasing hay and grass intake is really important as it will reduce the risk of stasis occurring. If you are currently offering hay and grass at all times to your rabbit, the only way to get them to eat more is to cut back on pellets, vegetables and treats.

The timing of feeding will also encourage more hay intake. Avoid feeding your rabbits greens and vegetables or pellets first thing in the morning as they will greedily consume this first and eat less hay. Instead, first thing in the morning offer them fresh grass or hay instead. They will be more likely to eat this when they are hungry. Vegetables, greens and pellets can be given when you get home or later in the day – preferably hidden around or used for environmental enrichment to encourage foraging. High fibre treats such as Fiba First sticks by Supreme can also be given to those rabbits who have dental disease or another condition that makes eating grass and hay difficult.

WATER

Providing your rabbit with water at all times is essential but particularly in the hotter weather. Rabbits consume much more water than dogs and cats on a per weight basis and can easily become dehydrated. It is essential to provide both bowls and a dripper bottle so they can choose. Bowls should be large heavy ceramic dog bowls filled right to the brim so they cannot tip them over.

EXERCISE

A great way to prevent obesity and help with gut movement, exercise is also really important for your rabbits wellbeing. If your rabbit has a hutch and a run it is preferable to have them joined together to allow for exercise at all times. Some rabbits just like us- can need a little encouragement to move around. Look online for environmental enrichment ideas to encourage foraging behaviours. Not only will this help with gut function and obesity but it also reduced unwanted behaviours in many rabbits.

PAIN

Any painful condition can lead to gut stasis but pain can be difficult to identify in rabbits. As a prey species, they have evolved to hide signs of pain or weakness as they are more likely to be singled out by predators. Older rabbits can develop arthritis like dogs and cats but it is underdiagnosed in this species because they hide it. It may be necessary to do a pain relief trial in some rabbits and look for signs of improvement to help assess for pain.

STRESS

Any stressful condition such as the presence of predators, building works, fireworks etc can lead to gut stasis. Reducing these stressors as much as possible is helpful. If the stress is unavoidable, then increasing the consumption of hay and grass for several days prior to a stressful event such as a routine vaccination can reduce the risk of stasis. One of the best ways to increase hay and grass intake is to cut back on vegetables, treats and pelleted foods.

Gut stasis is unfortunately not a completely preventable condition because there are so many factors that contribute to its development. Despite this, following the above guidelines can significantly reduce the risk of this condition for many rabbits.

