



RABBIT



Help! My Rabbits Not Eating

With Nicole Velotta, D.V.M.

A rabbit that stops eating for more than 2 or 3 days needs to be evaluated carefully and treated aggressively for the best chance of survival.

There are many conditions that can cause a rabbit to stop eating. These include malocclusion, gastrointestinal stasis, environmental stress, pain, and systemic disease processes.

Malocclusion is the misalignment and potential overgrowth of rabbit's teeth. A rabbit's incisors (larger front teeth) are the most obvious to diagnose, however this condition can also occur with cheek teeth. Cheek teeth are more difficult to visualize and a veterinary exam (sedation may be necessary) is often needed. This condition can make it painful or impossible for a rabbit to eat. Treatment includes trimming of the teeth to try and re-establish normal alignment. If the teeth continue to grow irregularly than they have to be trimmed regularly or the rabbit needs to be euthanized.

It is important to quickly identify the issue and provide immediate treatment for the best outcome.

Gastrointestinal stasis is one of the most common causes of an anorexic rabbit. Signs include decreased to no appetite and small fecal pellets (or none). You can confirm this by palpating the cranial (towards the head) abdomen and feeling a firm doughy mass. Causes of this condition often include a stressful event or an inappropriate diet. Early aggressive treatment is important for survival. Things that can be done at

home include force-feeding, subcutaneous fluids, warmth support to prevent shock, and a medication to promote movement of the gastrointestinal tract (Metoclopramide at 0.5mg/kg by mouth two to three times daily). These products/medications can be obtained from a veterinarian after an examination of the rabbit. Critical Care (force-feeding diet) can usually be purchased without an examination. See instructions and dosing information on how to administer these treatments.

Stress can also be a major cause of a rabbit not wanting to eat. If a stressor is not identified and eliminated then the anorexia can lead to gastric stasis as described above. Stressors in a rabbitry can include rat/mice infestation, loud noises (construction/barking dogs/storms), and inappropriate housing that allows fighting between animals. Weather can also play a factor if the rabbitry isn't fully protected from wind, rain, and sun exposure. Travel is a huge factor to consider especially with show rabbits. It is important to expose younger animals to short trips and local shows before going on a long trip such as traveling to a national. It is also important to limit the number of times these newbies are judged at their first shows. Try to avoid entering all a triple show plus a specialty or two all in the same day! This can be a stressor to even the seasoned show rabbit.

A rabbit in pain will have a poor appetite to no appetite at all. Pain can occur from a number of things including trauma, malocclusion, and gastric stasis. Signs of pain can be subtle and include increased respiration, hunched posture, grinding teeth, as well as anorexia. In order to get a rabbit eating again pain control is very important. A pain medication that can be used is buprenorphine (0.01-0.05mg/kg by mouth two to three times daily). This can be obtained from a veterinarian.

There are many other diseases/conditions that can cause a rabbit to lose its appetite. These include things such as respiratory diseases (pasteurella, pneumonia), parasites (intestinal worms), pregnancy toxemia/dystocia, and coccidiosis. Supportive care such as force-feeding, fluid therapy, and warmth support should be done as well as treatment of the disease/condition. Individual treatments will not be gone into for these in this article.

HOW TO SECTION

Critical care is a diet that can be force-fed to rabbits using a syringe. Wrap the rabbit in a towel and hold them against your body with them sitting up (do not place the rabbit on its back). Feed small amounts and allow the rabbit to swallow before giving more to help prevent it going into their lungs (aspiration). If you are unable to obtain fluids to give subcutaneously, you can give pedialyte orally in this same manner.



Subcutaneous fluids (such as LRS) can be given in the loose skin over the shoulders. This is done by tenting the skin and inserting the needle just through it. Fluid is then given either with an IV line or a syringe. A small rabbit should be given approximately 30-50mls, medium 50-100mls, and a large rabbit 100-150mls.

There are several causes for a rabbit to stop eating. It is important to quickly identify the issue and provide immediate treatment for the best outcome.



Veterinarian Nicole Velotta is with the ARBA Rabbit & Cavy Health Committee.