



When Your Bunny Stops Eating

By Julie Smith, Wisconsin House Rabbit News

Rabbits stop eating for many reasons, and this is always a serious event. Toxic bacteria in the intestinal tract will overwhelm the beneficial bacteria, leading to serious illness and death if the rabbit does not eat. Any rabbit who has not eaten for a second day needs to see a veterinarian with knowledge of rabbit medicine.

Prevention is the best cure.

A diet limited to three kinds of foods is the best gift that you can give to your rabbit. The first is high fiber pellets, the amount restricted according to your rabbit's weight. The second is fresh vegetables, especially dark greens such as grass (unsprayed), dandelions (unsprayed), endive, parsley, cilantro, escarole, carrot tops. These contain a great deal of water; and water and fiber are the best prevention of impaction. I recommend giving rabbits greens dipped in water and lightly shaken every night. Thirdly is the critically important non-alfalfa hay, available fresh at all times. [Read more about the importance of hay here.](#)

Sugars, fats, and carbohydrates in any other form should be avoided if you wish your rabbit to stay healthy. Rabbits are built to extract nutrients from a poor diet, and if you give your rabbit rich foods low in fiber, you are inviting the overgrowth of toxic bacteria and decreased motility in the GI tract.

Some people, including myself, give their rabbits a bit of Petromalt® as a preventative of trichobezoars ("hairballs") every week or two. Although many rabbit experts feel that hay and exercise are sufficient for the rabbit to pass fur in the stomach, I believe that during heavy molting, a lubricant is helpful. Additionally, if the rabbit were to eat a foreign substance, such as carpeting, a lubricant can help her pass it. I have seen droppings linked with fur (the "chain of pearls") return to large, separate round droppings after giving Petromalt®. During periods of heavy shedding, or if your bunnies are



frequent groomers ingesting a lot of fur (especially with angoras/long-hair breeds) a half-inch of Petromalt® daily for a week is suggested.

At the first sign of anorexia, try to stimulate the appetite with the rabbit's favorite healthy foods (but not harmful treat foods).

I feed each rabbit her allotted pellets twice a day; thus I can tell immediately if he or she is "off her pellets." At our house, pellets are very much like a treat, and most of the rabbits will consume their restricted allotment within one or two hours (but more typically, 15 minutes [Ed.]). When I first notice that a rabbit is uninterested in her pellets, I offer her Petromalt®. Rabbits love this, once they have acquired a taste. Thus, a rabbit who does not eat the Petromalt® is likely to have a more serious problem than one who will. Frequently, a rabbit will return to eating after one or two doses of Petromalt® spaced 5-6 hours apart. This may be because the taste has stimulated her appetite, because it has actually lubricated some of the accumulated fur and thus helped its passage, or only because a coincidence has occurred. But Petromalt® has been followed by a return to eating often enough for me to always try the technique. I also offer the rabbit a variety of fresh vegetables, especially greens dipped in water, and I constantly replenish any that she seems willing to eat. Once again, if she refuses the fresh vegetables that she usually likes, you must start taking her condition seriously.

Prevention is the best cure

If the rabbit does not eat by the second day, then I know I must find out the cause. To do this, I take the rabbit to a veterinarian knowledgeable about rabbits. It is particularly important that the veterinarian be capable of palpating the rabbit, taking and reading radiographs (x-rays) of the stomach and intestine, and checking the teeth (including the molars), two frequent causes of lack of appetite. But be aware that reading the radiographs correctly is just as important as having the equipment to take them.



Radiographs alone will not indicate blockage, as food in the stomach can be indistinguishable from a trichobezoar. Thus, the special species veterinarians at the [University of Wisconsin - Madison Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital](#) use a procedure to distinguish free floating substances in the stomach from a trichobezoar which may be causing impaction. A small amount of air is passed into the stomach; if it diffuses through the undigested material, then no impaction is likely. Sometimes the impaction can be in the pyloric valve, that is, the passage between the stomach and the large intestine. The diagnostic procedure in this case is to pass barium into the stomach to see if it can exit through the pyloric valve.

The veterinarian must also be able to check the molars, because some rabbits will gradually develop "points" or "spurs" that irritate the gum above or below the tooth, causing them to stop eating. Often, it is not possible to check the molars completely without anesthetizing the rabbit. Once the veterinarian has filed these points, the rabbit usually experiences immediate relief and will begin eating. I have also had rabbits with incisors a bit long but within the range of normal respond well to trimming. If neither the teeth nor the gastrointestinal tract seem to be the problem, then the veterinarian may need to do other tests, such as a blood panel or additional radiographs, to see if the rabbit has a disease condition.

Always be prepared to syringe feed your rabbit in case your veterinarian prescribes this as part of the treatment.

Most problems related to the GI tract are treated medically rather than surgically, but this will require that you syringe feed your rabbit. This may include feeding her medicines, baby food, natural juice and water mixes, and a pellet slurry or Critical Care. The House Rabbit Handbook describes and illustrates the best way to administer medicines and food to a rabbit. It also has some excellent information on gastric blockages.

Your veterinarian will probably give you a 1cc or 3cc syringe for medications, but if not, 3cc pediatric syringes are available at most drug stores.



Alternatively, you can purchase a feeding syringe at a pet supply store such as Mounds Petfood Warehouse. You need a good syringe so that you can slide the plunger smoothly to give the rabbit just a little bit at a time, about 1cc (1/5 teaspoon).

If you do not have access to *Critical Care* (a brand name recovery food which can be given to herbivores that are unwilling to eat their normal diet due to illness, surgery or poor nutritional status) and are told to give a pellet slurry, you will need to prepare one of the right consistency, so that it is not too watery to lack sufficient fiber nor too thick to go through a feeding syringe. The best way to prepare the pellet slurry is to grind $\frac{1}{4}$ of a cup of pellets in a clean coffee grinder. Before I was told about the coffee grinder method, I soaked the pellets in the liquid and then worked this through a sieve with a spoon. (Another option is to place the pellets in a mortar, moisten them with a bit of water, then mash them with a pestle, adding more water as needed until the right consistency is reached.)

To 1/4 cup of ground pellets, I add one cup of liquid. I used to use water until I realized that my goal was not just to get food down the rabbit, but to get the rabbit interested in food again. So now I use a combination of fresh juices made from carrots, parsley, apples, pineapple, or whatever fresh vegetables I know the rabbit likes. A juicer works well to prepare the veggie combination; but alternatively one might use Pedialyte, which has the additional benefit of electrolytes.

It is important to state at this point that you should not syringe feed a rabbit without knowing what is wrong with her. A rabbit with a complete stomach impaction does not need more substances in her stomach, which would be very painful. If the rabbit does not have an impaction but just a "hairball" or some other condition that has made her inappetent, another effective treatment is a gastric motility drug, which increases movement in the GI tract and stimulates the appetite. Metoclopramide or cisapride are the drugs that will do this, but they must be prescribed by your veterinarian, and they must not be used if the rabbit has an impaction, or



they can cause a rupture. This is why it is very important to go to a veterinarian who can accurately determine whether or not your rabbit has an impaction or just a "slow down" of the GI tract.

The road to recovery will depend on the rabbit's eating habits prior to illness.

To return your rabbit to eating, continue to offer her fresh hay, fresh greens and fresh pellets twice a day even as you syringe feed. If you are giving either metoclopramide or cisapride, follow the directions: give the rabbit the drug 15-30 minutes before you offer food. This is the optimum time for her to eat on her own. Returning the rabbit to healthy eating habits is a great deal easier if she is used to a good diet and is not suddenly being asked to change her tastes in food as well as overcome her lack of appetite due to illness. You may regret having given her junk food because she is sick and suffering, but imagine how she feels: she suddenly must learn to like food that is alien and far less appealing than the junk food she is used to.

I would like to elaborate on this point. When I have rescued rabbits who have been on terrible diets (such as seed, nut, pellet mixture), many have taken up to three weeks to change their tastes, refusing all pellets and living only on hay and very selected vegetables until they developed a liking for high fiber pellets and a variety of fresh foods. To these rabbits with unnatural tastes, the high fiber pellets that they should be eating will be unappetizing. I have even had rabbits urinate in the bowl with the high fiber pellets, treating it like litter. Thus, one puts terrible additional stress on the rabbit to suddenly change her food when she is ill. However, you cannot continue to give her junk food that has contributed to the problem in the first place.

Let the true bunny lover be a wise bunny lover: restricted pellets, unlimited non-alfalfa hay, and fresh greens, with the occasional carrot or fruit, is the true "love diet." Your rabbit will come to crave the variety of greens that



you give her as much as she loves the dangerous treat foods you may be offering her now.

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**This article has been updated to include nutritional and health information current to best practice. Updated May 1, 2013.*