



Gastrointestinal Bloat in Rabbits

Rabbits have a complex gastrointestinal (GI) tract, particularly when compared to other species like dogs and cats. A rabbit's GI system has been designed so that they are able to get the maximum amount of nutrients they can out of any of the foods they eat. They even re-eat some of their faeces (a process known as caecotrophy) to allow them to re-process nutrients that weren't absorbed the first time through!

Unfortunately, due to the complexity of their GI system they are prone to developing problems. Many of these are easily treatable however some are life-threatening. Today's article looks at one of the most serious conditions that rabbits suffer from – gastrointestinal bloat.

What is it?

Gastrointestinal bloat generally occurs when there is a blockage in the GI tract, most commonly in the early intestine. Rabbits are unable to vomit or eructate (burp) effectively meaning that the only way that food (and other items ingested) can leave the stomach is through the intestines. When food is broken down in the stomach both gas and different types of liquid are produced, leading to more stomach contents than just the food that was first ingested. When an intestinal blockage occurs, this process keeps continuing leading to the stomach becoming enlarged or bloated. If a blockage occurs in the intestines there is now nowhere for the stomach contents to go, which leads to the stomach becoming enlarged or bloated.

In some cases the stomach can become so enlarged that your rabbit's whole abdomen looks and feels like there is a large balloon inside of it. As the stomach enlarges it compresses a number of blood vessels which lead to your rabbits blood supply network being disrupted which can become life-threatening very quickly. The stomach also can get so large that it ruptures.



What is it caused by?

In most cases the blockage is caused by a combination of hair and food that has been ingested by your rabbit. This hair/food combination forms together to form a small ball that is called a trichobezoar. Other foreign items can also be ingested by your rabbit and cause blockages; in one of the cases we have seen a small pebble was to blame for the obstruction.

What are the signs to watch out for?

Rabbits that have a complete gastrointestinal blockage will generally go from being perfectly normal to very sick and not wanting to move within a few hours. They generally won't want to eat anything, will





not be moving much (often sitting in a hunched position) and their abdomen will feel bloated and painful. If your rabbit is showing any of these signs getting them to your nearest rabbit vet as quickly as possible is very important.

How is it diagnosed?

In many cases your vet will be able to have a fair idea that your rabbit may be bloated from examining them and palpating their abdomen. In most cases radiographs (x-rays) will be taken to assess the severity and treatment options. Taking a blood glucose measurement (which involves taking a small amount of blood from your rabbit) can also often help to confirm the blockage.



Is it treatable?

This condition is life threatening and in many cases it will kill your rabbit if you do not seek veterinary attention promptly. The main options for treatment once at the vet include emergency surgery to relieve the obstruction or high levels of fluid therapy and pain relief (as well as other supportive treatments).

How do I prevent it from occurring?

This condition is difficult to prevent completely however ensuring your rabbit has a good diet and that they are regularly brushed or shaved (to minimize hair ingestion) does help to minimize their risk.

If you have any further questions please don't hesitate to contact us

