

Help! My Rabbit Stopped Eating

Introduction

A decreased appetite (hyporexia), lack of appetite (anorexia), decreased frequency and size of stools, or lack of stool production are common signs of illness in the rabbit. These symptoms are often joined under the term Rabbit Gastrointestinal Syndrome (RGIS). Other names for this include rabbit gastrointestinal stasis, gastric stasis, gut stasis, gastrointestinal stasis, and gastrointestinal hypomotility.

RGIS is not an actual disease, but is instead a combination of symptoms which may be secondary to any illness resulting in discomfort or stress. As a result of the underlying cause, abnormalities in intestinal motility or function (called ileus) can occur. Common rabbit diseases known to produce RGIS include dental disease, liver lobe torsion, trauma, kidney failure, urinary tract disease, or gastrointestinal obstruction. Other predisposing conditions include stress, lower urinary tract disease, renal failure, cancer, heart failure, or any infectious disease. Infectious disease may either primarily affect the gastrointestinal tract, such as bacterial dysbiosis, viral diseases, and parasitic diseases, or may secondarily affect the gastrointestinal tract due to systemic effects on the rabbit. Less commonly, toxins from contaminated hay or consumption of lead-based paint may also impact GI motility.



QUICK FACTS



- **Rabbit Gastrointestinal Stasis Syndrome or RGIS is not a primary diagnosis and instead represents a group of clinical signs which can include changes in appetite and stool production**
- **There are many causes of RGIS in rabbits and diagnostic testing may be required to determine the underlying cause**
- **Appropriate nutrition and husbandry can help reduce the risk of RGIS episodes**
- **Trouble finding a veterinarian? The AEMV offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help exotic companion mammal owners find veterinarians around the world at www.aemv.org.**

Due to the long list of possible causes of RGIS, any loss of appetite or change in shape or frequency of your rabbit's stool may be an indication your pet requires immediate evaluation by a veterinarian. You, the pet owner, are a very important part of diagnosis and treatment, and outcomes are always better when rabbits are presented to the veterinarian early, when they are still medically stable. Many owners struggle with determining the appropriate time to bring their rabbit to the veterinarian. This handout aims to provide easy-to-follow guidelines for when it's time to contact your veterinarian.

Clinical Signs & Symptoms

Rabbits of any age, gender, or breed may present with illness and RGIS symptoms. There are four main categories of symptoms to assess:

- 1) **Appetite:** Decreased or complete lack of appetite
- 2) **Stool production:** decreased or lack of stool production lasting more than 4 hours
- 3) **Body position:** hunched, belly pressing, restless, lying down (and reluctant or unable to stand)
- 4) **Behavior:** normally social rabbits may not want to be touched or may avoid cage mates; shy or timid rabbits may allow handling, any rabbit showing sudden aggression (to cage mate or humans)

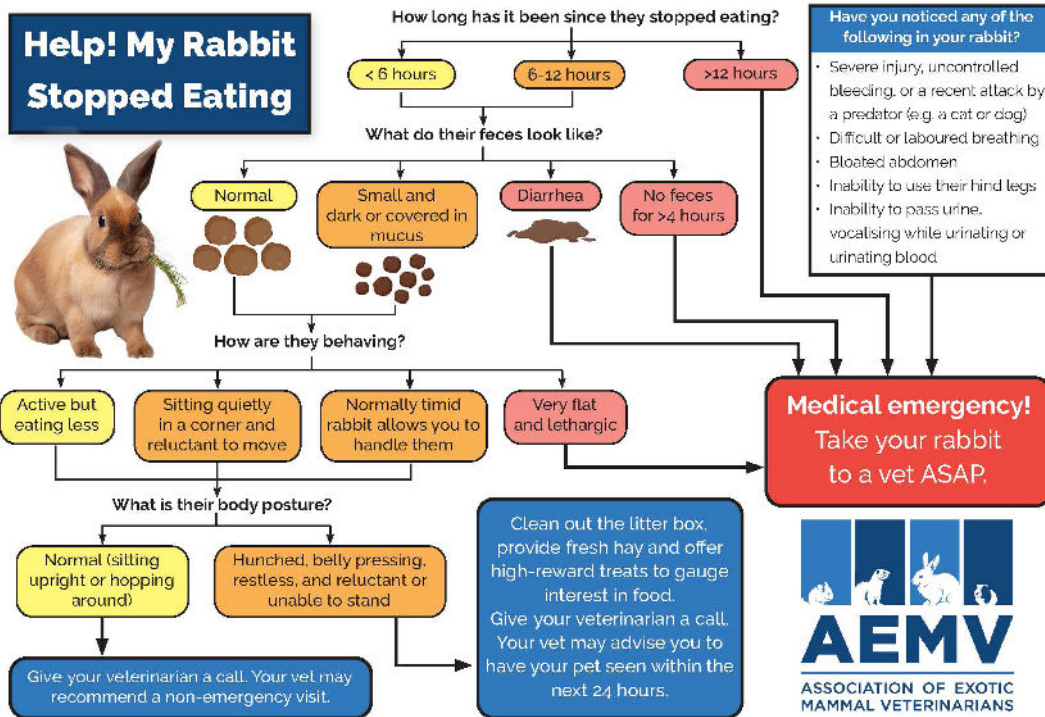
Steps to take when changes are first noticed:

- 1) **SEVERE-Contact Your Veterinarian:**
 - Severe lethargy, minimal response to stimulation
 - Uncontrolled bleeding
 - Severe injury, including fractures with an open wound or bone protruding from the injury site
 - Difficult or labored breathing
 - Bloated abdomen, especially when combined with teeth grinding or other behavior suggesting abdominal pain
 - Inability to use the rear legs
 - Any attack by a predator (such as a cat or dog)
 - Inability to pass urine, vocalizing while urinating, or passing blood (this may appear to be constipation, which is actually extremely rare in rabbits)
- 2) **MODERATE-Monitor Carefully**
 - Mild change in appetite, stool production, near normal body position, or behavior.
 - Clean out the litter box, freshen hay, and offer favorite treats to gauge interest in food. You may wish to give your veterinarian a call and plan a visit within the next 24 hours. Be certain to determine how to find after-hours care in advance.
 - If things change and the signs you notice become severe, call your veterinarian
- 3) If the changes noted resolve on their own, you may also wish to call your veterinarian and schedule a next available, non-emergency appointment.

Diagnosis

Since there are many causes of RGIS symptoms, including some that are potentially life-threatening, diagnosis of the underlying condition is essential to treatment. Diagnosis is based on the combined results of many different tests together with the history you provide and a thorough physical examination. No single test result is evaluated alone, and tests will be selected based on the history provided by you, the owner, along with certain physical examination findings.

Bloodwork and radiographs (X-rays) may be recommended for any rabbit presenting with a complete lack of appetite. This is to assess the severity of the secondary gastrointestinal dysfunction that may be occurring and guide supportive care.



Bloodwork may provide indication of the underlying cause, such as a liver lobe torsion, gastrointestinal obstruction, or renal disease. Radiographs may be performed to measure the size of the stomach in comparison the ribs and vertebrae or identify segments of intestines that are gas dilated. Repeating radiographs is common once treatment has begun to monitor for progress.

Additional diagnostics may be recommended after initial testing is completed and will likely be directed towards confirming the underlying cause of the rabbit's lack of appetite as well as assessing response to treatment. Additional diagnostics may include ultrasound, computed tomography (CT scan), specific pathogen testing such as parasite detection, or culture of any suspected bacterial infection.

Key diagnostics:

- Physical exam
- Bloodwork
- Imaging (x-ray, ultrasound, CT)

It should be kept in mind that in some cases, the underlying cause is not identified. Fortunately, general supportive therapy is often effective and many rabbits will recover.

Treatment

General supportive treatments of RGIS may include fluid therapy (intravenous therapy in the hospital for severe cases), pain control, syringe/support feeding if appropriate, and potentially other medications. Specific treatments are directed towards any identified cause of RGIS symptom.

Risk to Others

There are many causes of inappetence in rabbits and some may be due to illness that are transmittable to other rabbits or humans, while most are not.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are dependent on the underlying cause of inappetence.

Prevention

Excellent diet and husbandry, and stress reduction go a long way to keeping pet rabbits healthy. However, however, we do not know how to prevent all diseases that can cause RGIS symptoms.

A diet with appropriate fiber levels, that maximizes hay and minimizes pellets, will maintain good gut movement and allow your rabbit to better handle hair normally present in the gut. Your veterinarian may also recommend regular grooming to reduce fur consumption in some cases.

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The purpose of AEMV is to advance the health and welfare of companion exotic mammals through information dissemination, scientific research, collaboration, and professional development.

Online Resources

Follow AEMV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/AEMVveterinarians) for exotic companion mammal tips and resources. Our website, www.aemv.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help exotic companion mammal owners find veterinarians around the world.

Authors and Editors

Rae Porter-Blackwell, Marian Allison, Emily C. McConnelly

Graphic Credits

Ashleigh Peinaar

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