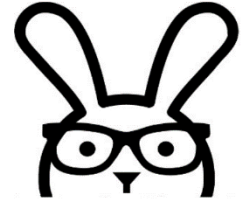


Rabbit Gastrointestinal Syndrome (RGIS)

Other common terms: Gut stasis, GI stasis, hypomotility, ileus.

Rabbits are hind-gut fermenters - due to the design of their gastrointestinal system, they need to continuously eat a high fibre, low carbohydrate diet in order to maintain a healthy, happy gut. Their gastrointestinal system contains large numbers of helpful bacteria that allows them to break down their food, and absorb the nutrients they need.



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Part of a rabbit's normal digestive process is producing and eating caecotrophs (squishy poops that look like raspberries) which contain essential nutrients. Caecotrophs are normally eaten immediately and are not seen by bunny parents - it usually just looks like they are just grooming their bottoms!

What is RGIS?

Rabbit gastrointestinal syndrome is a syndrome that occurs *secondary* to your rabbit not feeling well.

Rabbits rely on a good quality diet to promote healthy and continuous gut motility. When rabbits do not eat for a period of time, the lack of fibre and the presence of stress hormones causes the gut movement to slow down, and eventually stop. When the gut slows down, the healthy gut bacteria run out of food supply and become imbalanced. This results in build-up of gas and toxins - and a bunny with a very sore tummy.

The liver can also become affected, as it tries to regulate the rabbit's blood sugar levels despite the lack of food supply to produce energy.

RGIS is a very painful condition. It requires prompt veterinary attention as it can be life-threatening, especially if your rabbit has not been seen eating or pooping for more than 12 hours.

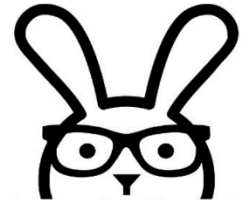
What can cause RGIS?

RGIS is a syndrome that occurs *secondary* to your rabbit not feeling well. This means that any factor or condition that is causing your rabbit to feel unwell, stressed, scared, upset (or a combination of above) can subsequently trigger a RGIS event. Inappropriate diet can also contribute to a RGIS, as this can demote gut motility and create adverse health risks. Such examples include:

- Sources of stress (changes to their environment, presence of predator animals like cats and dogs, loud noises)
- Sources of pain (dental disease, arthritis, intestinal blockage, ear infections, injury)
- Underlying disease (cancer, uterine cancer/disease, bladder sludge, kidney disease, obesity, etc.)
- Feeding excessive quantities of high sugar foods like carrots, apples, banana
- Insufficient fibre content
- High carbohydrate foods such as 'cereal mix' pellets
- Combination of the above

How is RGIS treated?

First, the primary aim is to stabilise the rabbit. This involves administering pain relief, and correcting dehydration. It is also a good idea to do a blood test, to obtain baseline health values and check blood sugar and dehydration levels.



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Once the rabbit is more stable, treatment may involve sedation to take X-rays of the abdomen. This gives us more information as to what may be going on in the gastrointestinal system, as well as making sure there is no intestinal blockage. If a blockage is suspected, this may be relieved with aggressive medical therapy or emergency surgery. Once a blockage has been ruled out, the rabbit will require supportive care including prokinetic medication (medication to promote gut movement) and syringe feeding every 2-4 hours. It may take hours or even days to get a rabbit eating and pooping normally again.

What happens next?

Once a rabbit recovers from a RGIS event, it is recommended to investigate what caused the event in the first place. In order to do this, some or all of the following tests may be recommended:

- Full blood tests
 - This checks general organ function and looks at how the immune system is performing
- Urine tests
 - This looks at kidney function, as well as checks for underlying bladder or uterine issues
- Sedation for oral examination and imaging
 - This provides information as to the rabbit's oral and dental health. While the mouth can be examined consciously with an otoscope, this examination is usually limited due to the rabbit's tongue and chewing movements - sedation allows for a more thorough examination without patient interference.
 - Imaging via X-rays or CT scanning is the best way to look for any signs of retrograde (backwards) growth of the teeth and signs of dental abscesses.
 - X-rays may reveal signs of arthritis, abnormal growths, heart disease, or bladder sludge.
 - CT scanning is the most optimal diagnostic tool for rabbits. It enables us to check the whole rabbit (including internal organ systems) for any abnormality, and only requires sedation for a very short period of time.

How can we prevent RGIS?

As RGIS can be a potentially life-threatening event, it is important to try to prevent it from occurring. While not always possible to eliminate such triggers, we can minimise and manage them, for example:

- Minimise stress, and prepare for stressful events for your rabbit.
- Feeding your rabbit an appropriate diet.
- Seeking veterinary advice as soon as possible if you notice any changes or concerns with your rabbit.

If your rabbit has a history of RGIS, it is important to investigate the cause - this will provide your rabbit the best chance of preventing it in the future.