

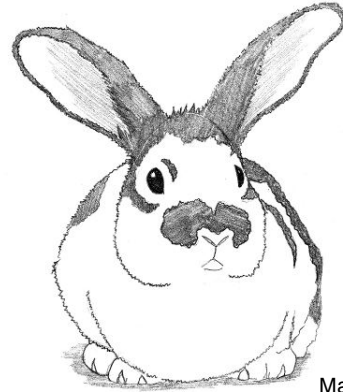
# “Bloat” and Gastrointestinal Blockage in Rabbits

Gastrointestinal obstruction and a stomach distended with gas and fluid or “bloat” is a serious health problem of rabbits.

## What causes bloat and obstruction?

In many cases, obstruction is caused by a mat of fur, therefore long-haired rabbits or rabbits housed with long-haired breeds are at increased risk for this medical problem.

Individuals fed a diet with inadequate dietary fiber are also less equipped to handle the hair normally found in the rabbit gut. Less commonly, ingested foreign materials like carpet, cloth fibers, rubber, or plastic can also block the gut.



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## Why is bloat a serious condition?

Any blockage involving the gastrointestinal tract can quickly become critical in the rabbit because rabbits cannot vomit or even belch. When the stomach cannot empty, saliva and stomach secretions quickly expand the stomach.

As the wall of the stomach is stretched and then stretched even more, blood flow is cut off and the stomach wall can die. The dilated stomach can also prevent blood flow to vital organs like the kidneys.

Without treatment, death can occur rapidly. In fact, gastrointestinal obstruction is the most common cause of sudden, unexpected death in otherwise healthy rabbits. Unless this condition is caught very early, the prognosis for rabbits with bloat and intestinal obstruction is guarded even with medical care.

## What does bloat look like in the rabbit?

This condition generally comes on suddenly. A rabbit that seems completely healthy will suddenly stop eating, defecations will stop, and the rabbit will appear very tired or lethargic.

As the condition continues, signs of abdominal pain such as a hunched posture, tooth grinding, and reluctance to move may be observed. The rabbit will also become progressively weaker, eventually lying down often in a stretched-out position.

## **Your veterinarian will want to...**

This condition is considered a medical emergency and your veterinarian will want to perform laboratory testing and abdominal imaging like x-rays and sometimes ultrasound. In many instances, multiple x-rays are needed to see if the obstruction is moving.

Your rabbit will also require aggressive supportive care including powerful pain medication and fluid therapy. Although medical care occasionally encourages the obstruction to pass, most rabbits require exploratory surgery.

## **Follow-up care**

Unfortunately the danger has not passed once the surgery has been performed. Your veterinarian will need to monitor your rabbit very closely to make sure the gut begins to move. Veterinary staff will listen to your rabbit's intestinal tract with a stethoscope and gently palpate the belly. Your rabbit's appetite and fecal output will also be observed carefully. Patients recovering well after 3 days appear to have a good prognosis for complete recovery.

## **Prevention**

A diet with appropriate fiber levels, that maximizes hay and minimizes pellets, will allow your rabbit to better handle hair normally present in the gut. Regular grooming can also reduce the risk of obstruction and some clinicians recommend regular clipping of long-haired rabbits to minimize their risk.

## **References**

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