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GI Stasis: The Constant Specter of Bunny Parenthood



A bunny exhibiting signs of stasis over an improper diet of too many pellets

One morning, every bunny parent's worst nightmare happened to me. I got out of bed, prepped my rabbits' salad, and poured their two servings of pellets into their food bowls. Normally, at the very sound of the scoop touching the pellets, my little Chowder would come bolting out from under the bed. But today, only her brother hopped out. I tried shaking the food bowl, sure that the melodious sound of her favorite pellets clinking against the ceramic would summon her. No Chowder. I poked my head under the bed and found her hunched up in the back corner. Feeling a growing sense of dread, I rushed to cut a tiny piece of banana to treat test her with. But when I crawled under the bed and offered it to her, she only sniffed it and turned away. She had GI stasis.

What passed next was me frantically trying to explain to my vet's receptionist that a bunny not eating is actually a life-threatening emergency, securing a grudging promise that the vet would look at her between his other appointments, then, after dropping her off, checking my phone for the next eight hours waiting for the vet to call.

While a dog or cat skipping a meal might not always be a cause for alarm, a bunny going even a [day without eating](#) can be deadly. Bunnies' guts need to be constantly moving crude fiber through their digestive systems for their bodies to function properly. If the gut slows or shuts down completely, gas, harmful bacteria, and masses of hair and undigested food can build up, resulting in excruciating pain and even death if not promptly treated.

Symptoms of GI Stasis

The most obvious sign of stasis is your bunny refusing to eat. Even their favorite snacks, like banana slices, will no longer tempt them. To catch stasis immediately, it's recommended to [treat test](#) your bunny once a day to ensure they're eating. Lack of appetite can also be accompanied by lethargy, sitting in a hunched position (a sign of pain), and loud tooth grinding. When you check their poops, you may also find that they're much smaller than usual, runny, strung together by thick strands of

wool, or [stuck together](#) in twos and threes.

How to Treat GI Stasis

Take your bunny to the vet

If your bunny stops eating, you should make a same-day appointment at your vet to get a diagnosis and start treatment. You'll need your vet to confirm that your bunny has no intestinal blockages and to help get your bunny's gut kickstarted. [Syringe feeding](#) your bunny when they have a blockage will only add to it and make their condition much worse. And the sooner you get your bunny treatment, the less serious their stasis will be. If you catch stasis while it's still developing, you can even see full recovery within a few hours.

If your rabbit's lack of appetite is also accompanied by a hunched position, loud tooth grinding, and a refusal to move, then the GI stasis has already gotten serious and you should consider this an emergency. If you don't have a rabbit-savvy emergency vet in your area, see if you can get a drop-off appointment at your regular vet, or call around to other rabbit-savvy vets. Most emergency vets will not even see rabbits, and many more will likely make the stasis worse.

Before you take your bunny to the vet, do give them 1-2 cc of simethicone (baby gas drops) to help with gas pain, and, if you have to wait a few hours to be seen, you should also give them a [tummy massage](#). Tummy massages can loosen up masses of food in the gut, help your bunny pass gas, and stimulate digestion. Place your bunny on your lap (a pillow will help them feel more secure) or on a table with a towel to give them traction, and gently knead your bunny's stomach. Your bunny's tummy may not be where you think it is, so we always recommend asking your vet or local rabbit rescue to show you its location *before* you have an emergency. A healthy bunny's tummy will feel firm and nice and full, yet pliable. A bunny in stasis can either have an empty tummy or a hard, inflexible tummy.

If there is a wait, you should also make sure your bunny stays warm as GI stasis can lead to mild to severe drops in body temperature. Check your [bunny's temperature](#) with a well-lubricated plastic thermometer inserted into the rectum. A healthy bunny's temperature should be between [101°F - 103°F](#). If your rabbit's body temperature is between 98°F-101°F, keep them warm by wrapping them in a fleece blanket and placing them on a heating pad or by surrounding them with warm water bottles. If your rabbit's temperature is less than 98°F then this is a dire emergency, and you should rush them to the vet at once.

Once at the clinic, your vet will listen for normal digestive sounds. Usually, your rabbit will have quiet, happy little gut gurgles, but bunnies in stasis can display loud gurgles from gas or complete silence. Your vet will also feel your bunny's tummy for blockages, check your rabbit's mouth for lesions or overgrown teeth, and may perform x-rays and bloodwork if necessary.

If your bunny doesn't have any blockages, the road to recovery is much easier. The vet may prescribe gut motility drugs to get your bunny's digestive system moving again, and they *should* give your bunny fluids to help lubricate the digestive tract, soften up any stomach contents, and prevent dehydration. They may also send you home with subcutaneous fluids, appetite stimulants, and pain medication.

If your rabbit does have a blockage, it can potentially be passed by softening it with fluids and using [enzymatic digestive aids](#). Surgery should only be used as a last resort as it has a [low survival rate](#).

What to do if your bunny stops eating when the vet is closed

Our little stinkers *love* to stop eating over the weekend or after hours. Honestly, it's like they want to stress us humans out. If your bunny stops eating when the vet is closed, start by feeding them 1-2 cc of simethicone and [10 ml of Pedialyte](#) per 5 lbs body weight, taking their temperature (and keeping them warm if necessary), and giving them a tummy massage. Then, monitor them to see if they're still pooping. If your bunny is bonded to another rabbit, try to watch the sick bunny for poops without separating them as this can cause your bunny stress and might make the stasis worse. If your bunny is pooping, even if the poops are small and dry, then that means there are no blockages and it's safe to [syringe feed](#).

If you have a pre-made restorative food on hand, such as Critical Care or Nutri-Rescue, slowly syringe-feed it to your rabbit according to the package instructions. You can also make a last-minute feed by soaking your rabbit's pellets in water to make a mash and then mixing it with banana or carrot-flavored baby food.

We always recommend learning how to syringe feed and getting your bunny accustomed to it before the stress of an emergency. If you're having trouble syringe feeding when the vet is closed, try calling your local rabbit rescue for help. We at Save a Bun Rabbit Rescue certainly would much rather you call us at 11 pm on a Saturday night than let your bunny pass away.

Do not feed your bunny pineapple or pineapple juice. While it does contain the enzyme bromelain, which is thought to help dissolve hair, an adult rabbit's highly acidic stomach will make the enzyme [unravel](#) before it can do any good. Sadly, the sugars in pineapple juice will likely disrupt your bunny's delicate gut bacteria balance even more, and make them produce painful gas.

Nursing Your Bunny Back to Health at Home

Once you get your bunny home from the vet, it's time to start the long road to recovery. If you were lucky enough to catch the stasis in its earliest stages, this road may be more like a few hours of careful monitoring and offering your bunny plenty of wet greens. However, many bunnies will need extra TLC for one to two weeks. Even though Chowder was still producing normal digestive sounds when I got her to the vet, it took her a week and a half to get completely back to normal.

Start with following your vet's recommended treatment. If your vet prescribed medications and subcutaneous fluids, make sure to stick to their application schedule.

You'll also want to call your vet every day or so to give them updates on your bunny's condition and make sure your bunny doesn't need brought back for another visit.

Provide your bunny with a quiet, stress-free environment

You'll want to give your bunny a quiet, stress-free habitat for their recovery that also has plenty of room for them to hop around in and stimulate their digestive system. If you're keeping your bunny in a cage, now would be an excellent time to switch them to a large x-pen with their cage door left open as a home base.

Make sure your bunny has a hidey house, but if your bunny is free-roam, you'll want to block off any furniture they could crawl under that would be hard to get them out of. You'll need easy access to your bunny to give them medications, fluids, and recovery foods.

Encourage your bunny to eat

If your bunny isn't eating, you'll need to syringe feed them, but ideally, you should get them to eat on their own. Try making several piles of hay on the floor near your bunny's favorite napping spots. Your bunny may not be motivated enough to hop into their litter box for lunch, but if there's some hay *right there* where they're laying, they might as well take a few nibbles.

Give your bunny plenty of fresh greens spritzed with water to help keep them hydrated. A rabbit not in the mood for hay or pellets may find some crunchy kale a little more appetizing, plus the water content in the greens will help keep your bunny's digestive tract lubricated. Try offering as many types of greens as you can to find something that will particularly tempt your bunny. For Chowder, her recovery took a decided turn for the better as soon as I gave her kale, and she ate an entire bundle of it in just one day. Most rabbits *love* cilantro, Italian parsley, kale, and carrot tops, and you can also consult the list of [rabbit-safe leafy greens](#) for additional ideas.

You may also want to try offering your rabbit different kinds of hay to tempt them, particularly if the hay you're currently feeding is dusty, short-stemmed, or brown. Fresh, long-stemmed, green hay will be much more appetizing to your rabbit, and offering several different kinds at once may encourage them to eat more. Many bunnies especially love the sweet, nutty flavor of oat hay, and oat hay is one of the highest-fiber hays you can get, making it especially helpful for bunnies in stasis.

Also, try giving your bunny plenty of high-fiber snacks. Bunny-safe twigs, grapevines, and dried willow leaves on the vine are all great choices. I try to always keep a little dried willow on hand for if one of my bunnies has a dip in appetite. It has almost as much fiber as hay and is as delicious as a treat to them, making it a great food to encourage them to eat while restoring gut motility.

Some sources recommend taking away pellets when your bunny's digestive system is under the weather, but if you're feeding a high fiber pellet (at least 22 percent and preferably 25 or higher), you can continue offering pellets to try and get your bunny to eat more. However, many bunnies will show little interest in pellets until they're almost all the way recovered. Definitely take away pellets if you're feeding anything low in fiber, high in carbs and sugars, and mixed with seeds or fruit.

You will, however, want to avoid giving your bunny any treats or fruits, as these are high in sugar and could cause gut bacterial imbalances.

Keep your bunny hydrated

GI stasis not only keeps your bunny from eating, but it usually makes them stop drinking enough as well. Your vet may have sent you home with subcutaneous fluids, but if not, you can help keep your rabbit hydrated with a little Pedialyte and plenty of wet greens.

If you're using a water bottle, now would be an excellent time to start offering a water bowl as well. Water bowls allow rabbits to drink much more much easier, and they feel more comfortable and natural as well.

Monitor your bunny's poops

In addition to watching how much your bunny is eating, you'll want to keep an eye on their poops. Don't be alarmed if you see small, dry poops for the first day or so; your bunny pooping at all is a good sign. Poop size is a function of how much your bunny is eating, and the more your bunny eats, the bigger their poops will be.

Keep your bunny from ingesting fur

Bunnies are constantly grooming themselves and ingesting fur in the process. Normally, this isn't an issue as they'll just pass the hair along with their high-fiber hay. But when gut motility is compromised, this hair is at risk of forming a blockage. You'll need to groom your bunny daily during this period to keep them from swallowing fur.

Incorporating a tummy massage into these daily grooming sessions can also go a long way. As mentioned above, tummy massages help stimulate digestion and help your bunny pass gas.

Give your bunny lots of love

Even for more independent bunnies, a little extra love and comfort can go a long way. My Chowder usually isn't that interested in pets, unless they're also accompanied

by some oats or a piece of banana, but when recovering from stasis, she'd tooth pur whenever I gave her head rubs. Bunnies can sense emotions, and will be able to feel your affection and care for them, which will be more than welcome when they're in pain.

Along these same lines, if your bunny has a bonded pair, try to avoid separating them during the recovery period. But if you can't keep your sick bunny's companion from eating all the greens and pooping everywhere, separate them with an x-pen, making sure they can still see and groom each other through the bars. You may also want to give them daily snuggle time.

Root Out the Cause of GI Stasis

Once your bunny is eating and pooping regularly, it's time to try and determine the cause of their stasis and eliminate it. For many bunnies, this may be an improper diet with not enough hay and too many unhealthy pellets and treats. Start switching your bunny over to a [healthy diet](#) immediately. Give them unlimited, fresh, long-stemmed hay every day (preferably in their litter box) 1-4 cups of leafy greens per 5 lbs body weight, and ¼ cup of high-fiber pellets per 5 lbs body weight. Remove any and all commercial rabbit treats from their diet and instead opt for a small piece of fruit or carrot once per day.

Stasis can also be brought on by an underlying disease, which should be diagnosed by your vet, or by stress. If your bunny was already being fed a proper diet, look for recent changes or possible stressors in your bunny's environment. Have you brought home a new pet? Does your bunny live outside and could they be being harrassed by a predator? For Chowder, after this initial bout of stasis, she experienced another drop in appetite (which I was able to immediately reverse) when I brought home a foster bunny. Even though they were separated by an x-pen, just the scent of a new bunny was enough to turn her off her food.

Additionally, stasis can be caused by your bunny getting into something they're not supposed to (i.e. candy), and for sensitive bunnies, can even be brought on by a sudden diet change. In Chowder's case, I'd been trying to switch her off of alfalfa hay (she'd just hit seven months), and even mixing the grass hay in 50/50 wasn't good enough.

Lastly, some bunnies are just prone to GI stasis. These bunnies will require a special, high fiber diet that's high in leafy greens and low in sugar and carbs. If you have one of these bunnies, mix oat hay or 1st cut hay into the regular hay (or let your bunny eat it straight if you can get them to) and feed 4 cups of fresh greens every day to keep your bunny's digestive tract hydrated. You'll also want to opt for the highest fiber pellet possible. Many timothy pellets such as Oxbow's, Small Pet Select's, and Sweet Meadow Farm's run as high as 29 percent fiber. Be careful to make any diet changes gradually to avoid disrupting your sensitive bun's gut bacterial balance.

It's important to remember that sometimes GI stasis just happens even if you're doing everything right and providing your bunny with a healthy diet and low-stress environment. Bunnies are fragile, mischievous creatures, and even the best of care and most stringent bunny proofing won't always be enough to keep them from going off feed or eating something they're not supposed to. Don't be too hard on yourself. Just like any other parent, bunny parents are always learning and figuring out what works best for their particular bun.

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< **Everything You Need to Take
Care of a Rabbit**

**RABBIT DIET: A COMPLETE GUIDE
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