

Rabbit Gastrointestinal Syndrome: A Rabbit Owner's Perspective On When to Seek Veterinary Treatment

by Dawn Sailer

As a House Rabbit Society educator, I know that when one of my rabbits presents with decreased appetite or anorexia, it is a potentially life-threatening situation. These are some of the clinical signs and symptoms of rabbit gastrointestinal syndrome (1), which is a term that covers any interruption in the normal function of the GI tract. There are many causes of GI dysfunction, and while some may be due to stress, discomfort or other relatively minor conditions, and some can be life threatening, for example, an actual obstruction of the stomach or intestines. The owner plays a very important part of diagnosis and treatment, and outcomes are always better when rabbits present to the veterinarian early when the patient is still medically stable. Many owners struggle with the appropriate time to bring to their rabbit to the veterinarian, so I am sharing the criteria I use to determine when to call the veterinarian.

Amy Remnaraine, a House Rabbit Educator, published an article to help determine rabbit quality of life at end of life and uses 3 primary criteria: appetite, affection and attitude (2). For a rabbit presenting with decreased appetite or anorexia, I utilize the same criteria to determine when to call a veterinarian (Figure 1).

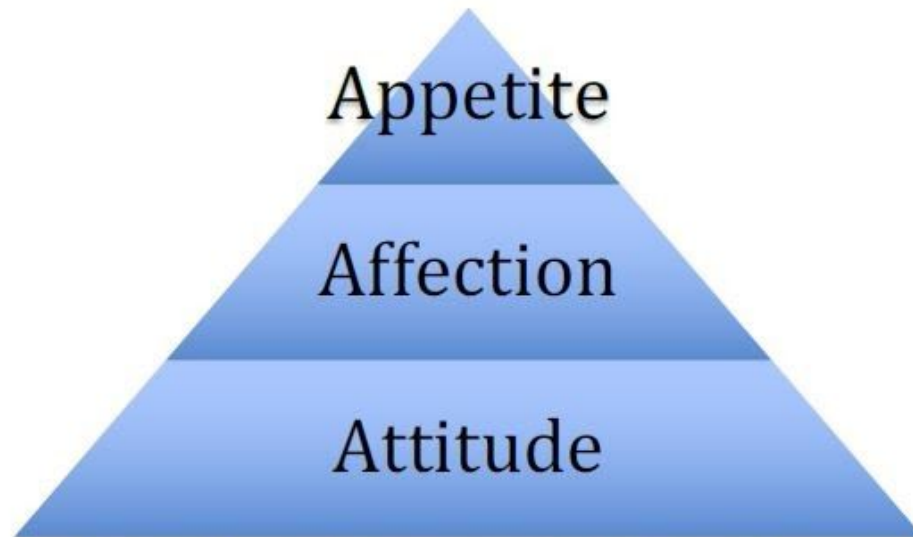


Figure 1: Objective Criteria to Determine When to Call a Veterinarian

If one of my rabbits presents with an abnormal appetite (the apex of the pyramid), I offer their favorite foods. If they eat, I chalk them up to being fussy and clearly will not call the veterinarian. If they will not take their favorite foods, I go to the middle level of the pyramid and assess their affection.

I define affection as their relationship with me and/or their relationship with their rabbit buddies (all of my rabbits have buddies). If there is no change in their level of affection, I will not call the veterinarian immediately, but continue to monitor them very closely. If abnormal appetite continues for 2 meals (e.g. turned their nose up at pellets for breakfast and will not dive into their greens for dinner) with no change in affection, I will call the veterinarian and have the rabbit

seen within 24 hours of missing the last meal. However, if a rabbit becomes less affectionate with me and/or their bunny friend(s), there is cause for concern and I will go to the base of the pyramid and assess attitude.

Attitude is the rabbit's overall personality and interaction with his/her environment. If a rabbit is hiding, withdrawn, eyes are sullen, has a major change in personality (e.g. allowing me to pick them up without a "fight" where they would give me a run for their money if they were well), I call the veterinarian immediately and bring the rabbit in as an emergency.

In conclusion, when a rabbit skips a meal, the loss of appetite itself is not an immediate cause for concern. There are more subtle indicators of ways your rabbit interacts with you and their environment which determine whether skipping a meal is a true emergency.

Table: Another Visual of Objective Criteria to Determine When to Call a Veterinarian

Symptom to Evaluate	Results	Call the Veterinarian Immediately (Y/N)
Appetite	Will only eat favorite foods, but rejects some food	N, will monitor for continued trend
	Will not eat treat or favorite food	See affection
Affection	Interacts with owner and/or bunny friends just like normal	N, will monitor very closely especially if they will not eat anything. Call veterinarian after 2 missed meals and make an immediate appointment
	No interaction with owner or bunny friends	See Attitude
Attitude	Sullen, withdrawn, hiding	Y, call the veterinarian and bring in immediately if abnormal appetite, affection and attitude
	Has normal attitude	N, assuming affection is normal Y, if appetite and affection are abnormal

(1) Lichtenberger M1, Lennox A., "Updates and advanced therapies for gastrointestinal stasis in rabbits." Vet Clin North Am Exot Anim Pract. 2010 Sep;13(3):525-41

(2) Remaraine, A, "End of Life," <http://rabbit.org/end-of-life/>