

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

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 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 are presented 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, 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; however I apply them a little differently than they may be applied at end of life. (Figure 1).

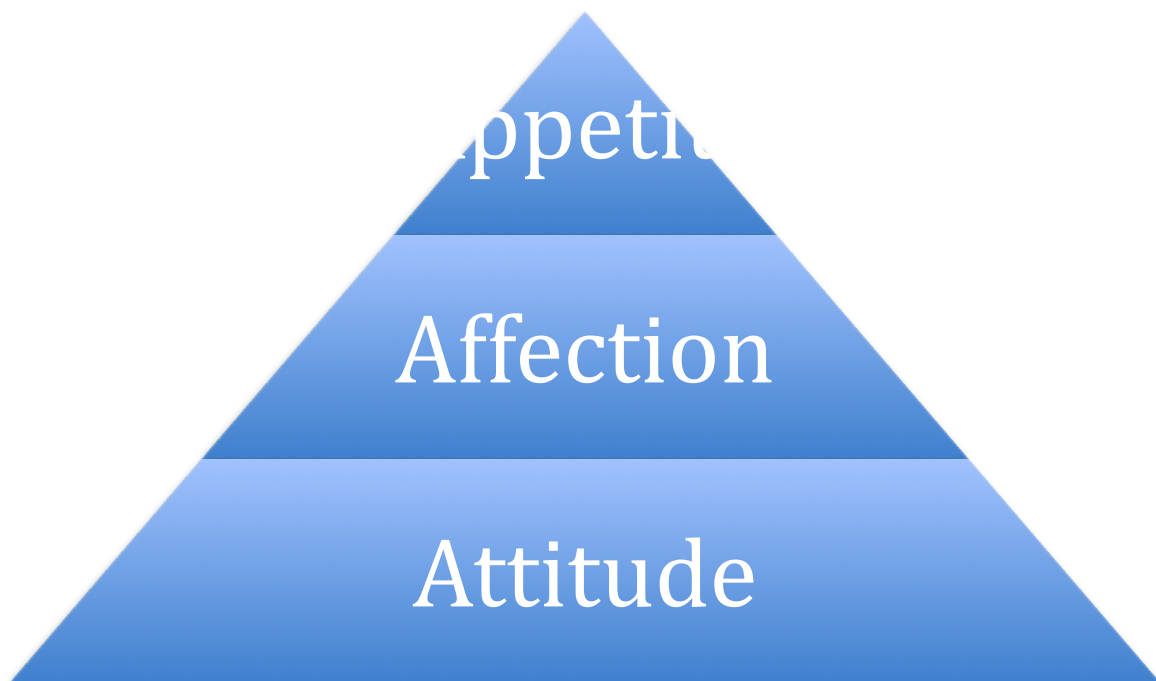


Figure 1: Objective Criteria to Determine When to Call a Veterinarian

If one of my rabbits presents with abnormal appetite (the apex of the pyramid), I try 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, 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 I will 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.

I define attitude as 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.

(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/>

Case Study, Lilian Rabbit

Background: Lilian is a spritely rabbit that asserts herself with other rabbits, she \ is the QUEEN. Lilian will accept pets from me, but when she has other things to do, she will hop off. She is bonded to a Liam, they have a deep bond. Lilian is fine cuddling with Liam or lying somewhere in close range so that she can see Liam. He is always in her sight. Lilian will allow me to pick her up, but she will give me a run for my money capturing her. She is also very tense when picked up.

On December 29, 2017 at 900 am, Lilian and Liam periscoped for their Oxbow peppermint treats, Liam took his treat while Lilian refused the treat. I tried other varieties (carrot and dill, apple banana, veggie, timothy) and Lilian would not take any treats. I feed the rabbits their Oxbow pellet, Liam dove in and Lilian hopped away and hid in a hidey box. We are at level one in the pyramid, loss of appetite.

Lilian is a "sneak" eater, hovering over her is not going to get her to eat. Because of this trait, I went to run a few errands. I arrived home at 1130am and Lilian had not touched her pellets. I continued to the middle layer of the pyramid, affection. Lilian

was hiding in a box with her nose in the corner, Liam was lying on the other side of the room. I reached out to pet her and Liilan let me pet her for a few minutes. This is a major change in behavior over 2.5 hours, so I proceeded to the bottom layer of the pyramid and assessed attitude.

Lilian was sitting hunched up, her eyes were half way closed, to me that indicates that a rabbit is in pain. Lilian then let me pick her up to assess her, which is very uncharacteristic for her.

Lilian's loss of appetite, sitting hunched up with half closed eyes, coupled with her atypical interactions with Liam and I, constituted an emergency. I immediately called the veterinarian and Lilian was seen immediately.