





Syringe Feeding

It is vital that rabbits keep eating steady amounts throughout the day and night, however sick rabbits or those that are recovering from an anaesthetic or in pain may be reluctant to do so. This is where assisted feeding is needed. "Failure to keep up with the demands of the gastrointestinal tract will result in microflora domination and bloat, or fatal damage to the gastrointestinal mucosal lining." (W Bament & G Goodman, BSAVA Manual of Rabbit Medicine, 2013).

You MUST seek veterinary advice BEFORE any syringe feeding to ensure the rabbit does not have an intestinal blockage!





There are a variety of different foods available that are made especially for syringe feeding:

-  Oxbow Critical Care (regular, fine grind or banana and apple flavour)
-  Supreme Science Recovery & Recovery Plus
-  Lafebbers Emeraid Nutritional Care
-  Burgess DualCare

Most of these mix with warm water and produce a gruel like paste that can be passed through a syringe or lapped from a bowl or spoon. The consistency can be altered to suit the method of feeding and the rabbit's preference and each brand will have feeding directions on the packet. Other things can be added to the mix to make it more palatable such as pure fruit or vegetable puree baby food (i.e. apple, banana, pear or carrot) and sometimes this also makes it easier to flow through the syringe.

It is generally agreed that you should aim to feed approximately 10-15ml/kg of the mixture, four times a day to give a sufficient amount. It is however, important to be guided by your patient as some rabbits will not tolerate this much or will need to take smaller amounts more frequently. Assisted feeding can often stimulate the rabbits appetite so be sure to offer some fresh tasty food in the enclosure directly after feeding.

Syringe feeding can be very stressful for an already compromised rabbit. It is vital that you remain calm and patient and undertake the feeding in a quiet area with minimal distractions. Make sure you have all items ready and within easy reach. Some items needed are:

-  Feeding syringes
-  Babies bib (useful for minimising mess)
-  Towels (one to wrap the bunny and one for the table)
-  Paper towels (to clean the syringes / patient as needed)

You will find your own preference as to what type and size of syringe you prefer. Supreme have designed a feeding syringe that holds 15ml and has a wide bore. This can be very good however, it does not have individual millilitre graduations on so it can be easy to push too much food into the

mouth in one go. Some people like to use 1ml syringes and cut the end of the barrel off. This means the food flows very well but beware...this also means the rubber bung can easily come out of the end of the syringe and be swallowed by the patient! It also means you either have to re-fill the 1ml syringe a lot or have lots pre filled ready to feed (if pre filling, you need to shake the syringe before feeding as the mixture can often separate). Personally, I like to use a 10ml syringe and find I have minimal problems with clogging if I add the baby food and warm water to the mix and have a slightly runnier consistency.

Procedure

(Taken from the BSAVA manual of Rabbit Medicine 2013)

- 1) Restrain the patient appropriately in sternal recumbancy.
- 2) Gently insert the nozzle lateral to the incisors and advance it 2-4cm into the mouth (dependant on rabbit size).
- 3) Ensure the patients head remains in a straight (dorsoventral) position while small volumes of food are administered.
- 4) Remove the syringe from the oral cavity between mouthfuls to encourage chewing and swallowing.

The following notes will explain the procedure in greater detail.

Some people like to sit on the floor to feed, others prefer to stand at a table. Use which ever method you are most comfortable with and the one that you feel the rabbit is most secure. Ideally, always have someone else to help you. If sitting on the floor, you can cross your legs and place the rabbit in your lap with their bottom and back legs in between your crossed legs. Then place their front legs over your thigh. This position stops them from reversing and allows you good access to hold their head and administer the food whilst keeping them in a natural, standing position. They can be towel wrapped before placing if preferred. If standing at a table, ensure the rabbit cannot reverse or easily jump off. Wrap in a towel or if the patient is calm, just stand them on a towel with their bottom touching your chest and your arm cradling around the side of their body. Alternatively, have one person holding like this and the other person can feed.

It is very important that the rabbit remains in an natural standing position whilst being fed to reduce the risk of it aspirating any food. If the patient is unwilling to sit still then you can use a towel to wrap them in the 'bunny burrito' which makes them easier to handle, supports their legs and backs and can make them feel calmer. Placing a hand over the rabbit's eyes is another method that can help to calm them, as well as talking to them quietly in a soothing manor and stroking their head and ears. I like to place a babies bib around the rabbit's neck as I find they tolerate this better than paper towel and it helps minimise the mess and wetness that can be caused by assisted feeding.

Avoid touching the nose or trying to feed between the incisors. Rabbits will naturally shy away from this as it is a blind spot for them. Approach from the side instead and aim for the diastema (the gap next to the incisors).

Do not try to rush the feeds. This will just result in the rabbit, and you, getting more stressed and less food being administered. It is vital that no more than 1ml of food is given per mouthful and that the rabbit is given time to chew and swallow. The syringe should be removed between mouthfuls and the rabbit's head stroked to encourage this. If the rabbit is refusing to swallow at all, then the feeding should be stopped and the patient re-assessed to avoid the risk of aspiration and choking.

The head needs to be held gently but with positive pressure as the rabbit will often try to turn away from the syringe. By placing a thumb on the top of the head and fingers under the chin or by placing the thumb and fingers either side of the jaw line, it gives you a good control of the head. Always make soft, smooth movements and don't 'fight' the rabbit. The slower and gentler that you are, the less the rabbit will resist you.

As the patient's health improves, it will become more difficult to syringe feed them. As soon as they are eating small amounts for themselves the assisted feeding can be reduced. Keep tempting the rabbit with their favourite foods and items such as fresh herbs (basil, mint, coriander and parsley). You can wave this in front of the rabbit and often they will get annoyed and bite it. This can be enough for them to get the taste and then eat the whole sprig. You can hand feed rabbits quite well – once they have started to eat you can hold up the next sprig so it goes in like a never ending piece of spaghetti.

So be patient, be prepared and take time to sit quietly and nurse your patient. Syringe feeding is not a quick fix – it is 'supportive nursing' to be used alongside veterinary treatment and medication.