Help Me Make It Through the Night

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You've had dinner, finished your chores for the evening. After winding down, you decide to say good night to your beloved rabbit before you go to bed. You notice she has not eaten her dinner salad. You try to give her a papaya tablet or her favorite treat and she turns her face away. Or worse, you find her quiet and unresponsive in obvious discomfort. First, you feel a giant pit in your stomach and then you wonder, “What do I do?” You think “Oh no, the vet is closed!”

You wonder if the emergency vet is experienced in rabbit medical care. You wonder if it is too late to call your favorite rabbit rescuer for advice. Unfortunately, anyone who lives with rabbits long enough has had (or will probably have) this stressful experience.

Rabbits, as prey animals, are by nature “symptom hiders.” This means rabbits hide their symptoms of illness until they are so sick that they can’t hide them anymore. This is a survival instinct. Their ancestors (wild European rabbits) live in large communities called warrens. In a warren environment, showing illness is a sign of weakness. Any rabbit acting ill is kicked out of the warren so as not to expose the warren to predators. Being kicked out of the warren means certain death. This explains why sometimes, when you have multiple rabbits and one is sick, the others will pick on her. The healthy rabbits often sense the sickness before you know about it. Hiding symptoms has some effectiveness for an individual rabbit in a wild environment. We only wish rabbits would adjust their behavior in our homes, letting us know early when they don’t feel well—but instinct is a strong thing. Now you can understand why rabbits naturally hide their symptoms. You see why your rabbit “seemed fine” a few hours ago and is now very sick.

If you are lucky enough to have an emergency vet hospital close to you that has a vet on duty who is experienced in treating rabbits, the best thing to do is to get your rabbit there as soon as possible.

If you are not so lucky, the next best thing you can do is to give your rabbit medical care at home to help her make it through the night until an experienced rabbit vet opens in the morning. Doing so will greatly increase her chance of survival. Since one of the first signs of any illness in a rabbit is that she stops eating, it is impossible for your rabbit for an initial healthy rabbit examination when you first adopt her and for a yearly healthy rabbit exam thereafter.

It is best to anticipate that an after-hours emergency may happen sometime during the life of your rabbit and have the emergency supplies listed below ready for use when you need them.

Supplies Purchased or Obtained from Your Vet

- Oxbow Critical Care, American Pet Dinner Critter Be Better, or similar powdered rabbit food to be fed through a syringe (available for sale through our HRS chapter and your vet)
- One 1-cc syringe
- Two monoject 10-cc oral syringes or two monoject curved-tip syringes
- Bag of Lactated Ringer Solution (LRS)
- IV drip set
- 18 or 20-gauge needles
- Gut motility drug, Propulsid (generic name, cisapride) or Reglan (generic name, metoclopramide)
- Pain medicine, Metacam
- Antibiotic, Baytril 10 milligrams (mg.) per milliliter (ml.) concentration or SMZ TMP 48 milligrams (mg.) per milliliter (ml.) concentration

Supplies Purchased Over the Counter (OTC)

- OTC Anti-gas medicine, (Maalox Multi or simethicone infant gas drops)
- Pedialyte or Gatorade (you can use water if you don’t have these)
- V8 Juice
- Snuggle Safe, microwaveable warmer, purchased at pet supply stores or online
- Clean towels

If you have determined that your rabbit is sick and you have no professional help until the morning, following the four major steps below can help her make it through the night until you can get to your vet in the morning.

**STEP 1: FLUIDS AND MEDICINE.** To start your rabbit on the road to recovery as quickly as possible, it is best to start by giving sub-Q (under the skin) fluids and drugs. You will be administering the Lactated Ringers Solution (LRS) fluids under the skin and the drugs by mouth. It is best to obtain individualized dosages for the LRS fluids and the drugs listed below for your rabbit.
This article is intended for use as advice in an emergency situation only. It is not a substitute for professional veterinary care.