



Help Me Make It Through the Night

by Laurie Kuhn, with veterinary input by Keith Gold, D.V.M.

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 hidiers." 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



Emergency supplies to have on hand include anti-gas medicine, Snuggle Safe warming disc, and feeding syringes.

the average person to know what is wrong. It could be as simple as gas or it could be as complicated as GI stasis, urinary tract problems, teeth problems, ear infections, cancer, etc.

Make no mistake—a rabbit who is not eating is ALWAYS an emergency, so even if your rabbit seems better the next day, it is imperative that you take her to be examined by an experienced rabbit vet as soon as possible. Most vets who are experienced in rabbit care know that a sick rabbit needs immediate care and will allow you to bring your sick bun in for an exam right away. This is why it is also very important to establish a relationship with an experienced rabbit vet before your rabbit gets sick by taking

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 Diner 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



Administering emergency aid to a sick rabbit requires knowledge, patience and a gentle, caring touch.

rabbit ahead of time from your vet; however, approximate dosages (based on the weight of the rabbit) calculated by very experienced rabbit vet Dr. Keith Gold are provided below for use in the event you don't have individualized dosages ahead of time.

First, administer the LRS fluids. (You will need a bag of Lactated Ringer solution, an IV drip set and 18 or 20 gauge needles.) It is important to have a trained professional at your vet's office show you how to perform this procedure ahead of time. To administer the LRS fluids, place your rabbit on your lap, wrapped snugly in a towel to restrain her while you administer the fluids. Hang the bag of fluids (with the IV drip set attached to the bag of LRS fluids and the needle attached to the end of the IV drip set) from something much higher than you. (I like to sit on the bathroom floor with the IV drip set hanging from a door hook or shower curtain rod.) Pull up the skin on your rabbit's shoulder area to create a "tent" of skin; insert the needle at a 45 degree angle into the tent of skin (being careful not to poke the needle through the other side of the tent of skin); roll open the release valve on the IV drip set (which will allow the fluids to flow) and watch the 100-cc markers on the bag of LRS fluids to determine when the appropriate amount of fluids has been administered. Once the appropriate amount of fluid has been administered, roll the release valve closed and remove the needle from the rabbit's skin.

- Lactated Ringer solution (LRS) sub-Q (usually in the shoulder area) if you have it and know how to administer it. Give 100 cc of LRS for rabbits weigh-

ing up to ten pounds; 150 cc for rabbits weighing over ten pounds

Next, administer the appropriate drugs. (You will need a 1-cc syringe and the drugs listed below.) To administer the drugs, place your rabbit on your lap, wrapped snugly in a towel to restrain her while you administer the drugs. Gently insert the syringe in the side of the rabbit's mouth. Slowly syringe a small amount of medicine into her mouth. Always give her time to swallow before giving her more. Do not give more than the recommended amounts. If your rabbit is not swallowing the medicine, STOP giving the oral medication and proceed to Step 3.

- Maalox Multi to help break up gas. **Dosage:** 0.4 cc for all size rabbits.
- Metacam for pain. **Dosage:** 0.05 cc for rabbits weighing up to five pounds and 0.1 cc for rabbits over five pounds.
- A gut motility drug to get her gastrointestinal system moving, Propulsid (generic name, cisapride) or Reglan (generic name, metoclopramide). **Dosage:** 0.1 ml/cc per pound of body weight.
- Antibiotic to start to control possible infection, either Baytril 0.1 ml/cc per pound of body weight or SMZ TMP 0.25 ml/cc per pound of body weight. You can use either antibiotic but do not use both.

STEP 2: FOOD AND ORAL LIQUID.

(You will need two monoject 10-cc oral syringes or two monoject curved-tip syringes and the liquid and food listed below.)

Since rabbits need food and liquid moving through their system to stay healthy, give her the food and liquid listed below. If you are using the monoject curved-tip syringes, cut the end off one syringe, leaving a small nub to insert into her mouth to use with the Critical Care. Then cut just a snip off the end of the other syringe to administer the Pedialyte, Gatorade or water. (A set of animal nail clippers works well to cut the monoject curved tip syringes.)

Place your rabbit on your lap, wrapped snugly in a towel to restrain her while you administer the Critical Care and the liquids. Alternate giving Critical Care (or V8 juice) and liquids (Pedialyte, Gatorade, or water). Gently insert the syringe in the side of the rabbit's mouth. Slowly syringe a small amount of food or liquid into her mouth. Always give her time to chew and swallow before giving her more. Do not give more than the recommended amount. If your rabbit is not swallowing the food or liquid, STOP syringe feeding and proceed to Step 3.

- Pedialyte, Gatorade, or water to moisten her stomach contents and help things move through her system. **Dosage:** 5 ml/cc for rabbits weighing up to two pounds; 10 ml/cc for rabbits weighing between two and five pounds; and 15 ml/cc for rabbits weighing over five pounds.
- Critical Care, food to be syringe fed. Mix according to the directions on the package; you will probably have to add more liquid to make a slurry that can be drawn into the syringe. Give around 15 ml/cc (V8 Juice, 15ml/cc, can be used if Critical Care is unavailable).

STEP 3: COMFORT. Once you have given her the sub-Q fluids, medicine, food, and oral liquids, it is time to put her in her cage where she feels comfortable and safe. It is important that the cage and litter box be clean so you can tell whether or not she is pooping and peeing. If your rabbit has a partner, some vets suggest separating a rabbit from her partner briefly, to determine if the ill rabbit is pooping and peeing or not. Separating must be done with caution because separating bonded rabbits often causes additional stress. It should be done so that they can still see and touch each other through a divider. If possible, obtain that same information through careful observation without separating the rabbits.

Warm a Snuggle Safe disk in the microwave, wrap it in a clean towel (so she won't be burned by it), and place it near her to allow her to snuggle up to it to get warm. Warming instructions come with the disk. Do not overheat the disk. Although it is very hard to do, it is very important to leave her alone and not hover over her too much. Hovering will make her worry and hinder her recovery. Now it is time for you to relax as much as possible, get some sleep, and pray to whatever you believe in for her recovery.

STEP 4: VETERINARY CARE. Last and most important take her to an experienced rabbit vet AS SOON AS POSSIBLE! If your rabbit is bonded to other rabbits, it is important to take the other rabbit(s) along on the trip to the vet. The sick rabbit will be comforted having her partner(s) with her and often rabbits who are separated during a trip to the vet fight when they are put back together. If your rabbit requires hospitalization, it is important to leave her partner(s) with her during the hospital stay for the same reasons. 🐰

This article is intended for use as advice in an emergency situation only. It is not a substitute for professional veterinary care.