

Feeding Rabbits with Special Needs

A rabbit may have special dietary needs because he either cannot or will not eat normal food on his own. This may be a life-long condition resulting from molar malocclusion; a short-term condition resulting from an acute illness or GI slowdown; or a long-term condition related to a chronic illness such as head-tilt. It is important to understand that if your rabbit has eaten **nothing** in 12 hours, he may begin to develop gastric ulcers or liver damage. Regardless of the underlying physical or medical condition you are facing, it is critical to keep your rabbit eating.

The simplest form of a “special needs” rabbit is one with incisor malocclusion. Most rabbits with this condition will be able to eat pellets and hay without assistance. However, they will need help with fresh produce items since incisors are used to bite off pieces of vegetables and leafy greens. Vegetables and leafy greens will need to be chopped into “bite-sized” pieces, a term that varies from rabbit to rabbit. Lauren, who had her incisors removed, does quite well with coarsely diced carrots and broccoli and leafy greens torn into pieces roughly half the size of human salad bites. Smokey, on the other hand, could only eat carrots and broccoli that were chopped in a food processor and was unable (or unwilling) to even attempt to eat leafy foods.



If your rabbit becomes ill and stops eating on his own and you cannot tempt him to at least “nibble” by hand-feeding him, your veterinarian will probably advise you to **carefully** syringe feed him. Your veterinarian may prescribe Oxbow’s Critical Care (a timothy-based product) or she may suggest one of the following:

- Pellet slurry (ground pellets mixed with water)
- Canned pumpkin (100% pumpkin only, not pumpkin pie filling)
- Baby food (avoid ones with added salt, sugar, or onion) or pureed vegetables or fruit

There are also many recipes available online that combine two or more of the above ingredients. Some of the best recipes can be found at:

<http://carrotcafe.com/n/syringefeed.html>

These recipes can be used “as is” or can be the starting point for developing a special formula for your special needs rabbit. Be creative — try to incorporate one or more of your bunny’s favorite foods, whether directly or through baby food. As always, discuss these recipes and your proposed variations with your veterinarian before trying them, since some ingredients can aggravate certain GI ailments.

The following tips can make syringe feeding less stressful for both you and your rabbit:

- Make sure you have the syringe filled and ready to use **before** you pick up your bunny.
- Approach your bunny in a calm, confident manner, establish eye contact, and explain to your bunny what you need to do and why. Talking to your rabbit has a calming effect and shows respect.
- Find a position that is comfortable for both you and your bunny. Some people syringe feed and give medications sitting on the floor. Others find it easier to work standing up with their bunny on a surface such as a washer/dryer, kitchen or bathroom counter, or baby’s changing table.
- **Always** hold your rabbit in a position so he is able to swallow easily.
- **Always** point the syringe toward the side of your rabbit’s mouth and empty it slowly, making sure he swallows what is in his mouth before adding more.
- **Never** point the syringe straight toward your rabbit’s throat — this is a good way to choke him and/or get liquid in his lungs.

Feed him as frequently as possible throughout the day, and give as much as you can into him at each feeding. When he clenches his teeth and won’t swallow, stop for a while and try again later.