

Rabbit Diet Survey: Incidence of GI Stasis Among Breeders and Pet Owners Feeding Various Diets

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A survey was done online asking breeders and pet owners what type of diet they fed their rabbits, the amount of hay fed, experience with GI Stasis and dental problems. The goal was to see if any type of diet influenced the incidence of GI Stasis as well as to see if the diet influenced teeth problems in rabbits. There were a total of 32 responses. Sixteen were breeders, fourteen were pet owners, and two responded both. Looking at the responses those feeding a diet composed of hay and vegetables with very restricted pellets had a higher incidence of GI Stasis than the breeders and pet owners feeding a pellet based diet. There may also be a link to feeding timothy based pellets and GI Stasis. There was also evidence based on the responses that free feeding hay does not prevent GI Stasis. As far as dental issues only one respondent said their rabbit needs teeth filed so in this survey dental issues possibly caused by diet weren't an issue.

The overall incidence of GI stasis was 41%. No breeder fed a hay/veggie diet while among pet owners the number who feed a hay/veggie diet is only 19%. Combining the breeder and pet owner responses 13 (41%) reported experiencing GI Stasis. Among pet owners the incidence was 44% (7 out of 16 respondents). For breeders the incidence was 39%. The survey did not ask breeders for a total number but it can be safely assumed that the breeders responding have a much higher number of rabbits compared to the pet owners.

Looking at just the pet owners, those who fed a pellet based diet and reported GI Stasis were 30%. Those feeding a hay/veggie based diet had a GI Stasis incidence of 66%. Five pet owners reported feeding timothy hay based pellets and 60% of those reported GI Stasis. One pet owner responded that they felt their rabbit "came with" GI Stasis and they fed a hay/veggie based diet. Another pet owner reported GI Stasis following surgery and they fed a pellet based diet.

Hay

Out of the total responses 84% fed hay. Of those responding yes to GI Stasis all fed hay on a regular basis with 54% free feeding hay. The rest fed hay on some regular basis between a handful daily to 1-2 times per week. Four respondents said they do not regularly feed hay and none of them had GI stasis. It appears that free feeding hay does not prevent all GI stasis issues nor does not feeding it cause problems.

Other Information

In the course of researching rabbit diet information I came across a post on the "Etherbun" yahoo group. It is dated April 2, 2002 and posted by "Sandy M". She describes the results of a diet survey she posted on the group. She received 90 responses and said the reason for the survey was for "a rough idea as to how many people are feeding greens vs pellets and how often there are GI problems such as gas and stasis." The survey has some interesting results.

Since this particular group is run by rabbit "rescue" it is likely most people on the list follow "rescue" diet guidelines which stress a hay/veggie diet over a pellet base diet. All 90 respondents fed hay. The overall GI problem incidence was 43% which is very close to my survey's 41% GI stasis incidence. Sandy M broke the diets into 3 categories, pellet based (10 respondents), greens/vegetables/no pellets (7 respondents), and a diet mix of pellets and greens (73 respondents). When one looks at GI problems in the 3 different groups you have 90% of those feeding the pellet base diet no GI problems, 71% of those feeding greens/veggies/no pellets had no GI problems, and 51% of those feeding a pellet/green mix had no problems.

In the book Rabbit Health in the 21st Century 2nd edition 2003 author Kathy Smith writes about the recommendation of feeding a diet that is composed of hay and greens and no pellets. She states "Recently however a small but growing number of caretakers with rabbits who suffer from chronic or recurrent episodes of gas or GI stasis have reported dramatic improvement after switching their rabbits to a diet void of any greens ie just hay and pellets or a diet where greens are fed only as an occasional treat."

In the 2001 Rabbit Education Society Health Survey when asked about diet 61% fed a pellet based diet, 24% a pellet/veggie based, and 14% a veggie based. Incidence for GI Stasis was 35% for pet owners and 21% for breeders. When diet and GI stasis was compared it broke down to 5% pellet based diet, 8% veggie based diet, and 23% a pellet/veggie diet. Also of note was 13% of those feeding timothy hay based pellets reported GI stasis.

Conclusion: What this survey demonstrates is that more research into what pet owners feed rabbits and how that relates to GI stasis is needed. There may be some sort of link between feeding greens as a major component of diet and GI stasis. There may also be an issue with feeding timothy hay based pellets. It is also difficult to find a good sample of willing pet owners to participate in diet surveys, but if one could the results may be very enlightening.