

Rabbits And Hairballs

Are hairballs a cause of gastrointestinal distress in rabbits?

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Q: We have a very cute Holland lop rabbit. The problem is hairballs. When she goes into heavy shedding, hairballs sometimes get stuck in her stomach. On three occasions, we ended up taking her to the animal hospital. Two of those times, she needed to stay overnight. At our most recent visit, the veterinarian suggested that we mix pineapple juice in her water to aid in digestion of the hair.

A friend who raised angora rabbits suggested a small amount of mineral oil on her pellets to help move the hair through. Do you have a suggestion on how much to use or any other suggestions on helping our rabbit avoid problems with its hair?

A: I constantly talk with people about the concept of hairballs in rabbits. I do not believe hairballs are the true problem in rabbits. Rabbits on a proper diet that get a proper amount of exercise should not have gastrointestinal problems. A Proper diet for adult rabbits that are not pregnant or lactating includes few to no pellets. The diet should be a high-fiber diet. Hay and grasses should constitute the majority of the diet. When the rabbit's gastrointestinal tract has less than optimal amounts of fiber or too many carbohydrates are in the diet, digestion may become slow. Therefore, it seems like hair is blocking the stomach. I suggest improving diet and exercise rather than using pineapple juice or mineral oil.

Some people may suggest brushing your rabbit often during shedding season to remove hair before your rabbit does. I have heard others counter this suggestion by saying that brushing a rabbit causes some rabbits to groom to a greater extent to remove the effects of the brushing!