

Feeding the Angora Rabbit & Wool Block Prevention

General Feeding Recommendations

1. Fresh water should be available at all times. Providing water via a hanging water bottle or via automatic watering system works better than using bowls because the water stays cleaner and it avoids the problem of the rabbit becoming matted and wet under the chin.
2. Good quality hay should be fed free choice. Many books recommend Timothy hay, but any grassy type of hay is acceptable (e.g., coastal, Bermuda, orchard grass). Alfalfa should be avoided under most circumstances because of the high levels of calcium it contains. Use of an outside or hanging manger is preferable to putting hay in the hutch because it avoids getting hay in their coat. Feeding hay is highly desirable for Angora rabbits because allowing the rabbit to feed at will keeps the digestive tract healthy, aids in prevention of wool block and provides them with diversion and entertainment (enrichment).
3. A measured amount of a good quality, fresh rabbit pellets should be fed once or twice daily. Purchase a brand of pellets that looks green and smells fresh. Avoid buying bags so large that you take a long time to use up the feed. Feeding pellets free choice should be avoided except for does with litters as free choice feeding is likely to result in excess weight gain and reproductive problems.
4. Rabbits enjoy treats and small amounts of vegetables/fruits (e.g. carrots, apples, bananas, etc.) and/or dried bread or shredded wheat biscuit can be fed daily. New kinds of treats should be introduced gradually and fed in very small amounts at first.

Wool Block Prevention

Wool block is the formation of a hair ball in the stomach and intestines of the rabbit. Angora rabbits, like cats, groom themselves frequently and may ingest large quantities of hair; however, unlike cats, rabbits are unable to vomit to get rid of a hairball so hair they ingest must pass through the whole length of the intestinal tract in order to be eliminated. A wool-blocked rabbit is unable to get adequate nutrition, becomes thin and slowly starves to death. The best "cure" for wool block is a good wool block prevention program.

A good wool block prevention program has four elements: (1) feeding the appropriate diet, (2) watching the condition of the droppings the rabbit is passing, (3) genetic selection and (4) proper grooming. The first three of these elements are discussed here and the third in an additional handout.

Follow the general guidelines above for feeding. It is particularly beneficial to have hay in front of the rabbit at all times. One day per week feed the rabbit no pellets. On that day give the bunny hay as usual and a couple of tablespoons of whole oats and/or extra fresh vegetables. This gives the rabbit's stomach a chance to "clean out." It may also be beneficial to feed one or two papaya pills (obtainable at most drug or health food stores) on a daily basis. Most rabbits like papaya pills and regard them as a treat. Feeding of fresh pineapple or papaya on an occasional basis can also be done. The theory behind this is that the enzymes in the papaya help dissolve the masses of food within the fiber thus allowing it to be more easily passed through the intestines. Some rabbit breeders and veterinarians no longer think

this reasoning is valid and it has not been subject to scientific studies. However, feeding papaya tablets or raw papaya or pineapple as described above is unlikely to harm the bunny and may be beneficial.

The conscientious rabbit owner should become an expert in “scatology,” i.e. evaluating the health of the rabbit by studying their droppings. It is first important to become familiar with the appearance of your rabbits droppings by studying their appearance on a daily basis. This is because “normal” size will vary somewhat depending on the size of the rabbit. Normal droppings also should be rounded in shape, moist in appearance, if recent, and firm but not dry or gluey looking.

Droppings that have become progressively smaller can be one of the first indications that a rabbit may have a developing case of wool block. In this case the droppings appear smaller because the stomach or intestines are partially blocked with hair. At this stage the rabbit may be behaving and eating normally, however all is not well in the intestinal tract. The best thing to do with a rabbit in this condition is to groom it thoroughly. Ideally, a complete haircut is in order if the rabbit is anywhere close to normal clipping time, but at the very least the rabbit should be groomed with slicker brush and comb to remove any loose hair. If the bunny is not one that relishes their hay then decreasing the amount of pellets being fed while simultaneously increasing the hay available and the amount of vegetables offered is desirable.

Another indicator of developing wool block is the “string of beads” appearance of the droppings. In this case there may be a lot of hair in the intestinal tract but it is being mingled with and attached to the droppings, but the rabbit does not necessarily have a narrowed or partially blocked area in the intestine or stomach. Following the advice on grooming and feeding given above is desirable at this stage.

An issue that often comes up is what should be the place in a wool block prevention program for use of Petromalt®, CatLax® and similar products. While this used to be a recommended preventive practice for individual rabbits that were more subject to wool block or as a wool block treatment, opinions among breeders and veterinarians are now divided. It is best to consult with the individual breeder from whom you obtained the rabbit to get their opinion (much depends on the individual rabbit and practices of the breeder with respect to that line of rabbits) and to also discuss the matter with your veterinarian or another knowledgeable breeder. Overuse of these products (more than once weekly or more than one inch of paste) should be avoided in otherwise healthy rabbits and the rabbit should never be force fed any petroleum-based products due to the risk of aspiration into the lungs or choking. Because a tendency to wool block can be inherited, rabbits needing frequent treatment for wool block in spite of being on an appropriate feeding regimen and kept current on grooming, are undesirable to use in a breeding program.

A final note on grooming: Other than correct feeding, keeping current with grooming is the single most important factor in maintaining a healthy angora rabbit. Always remember to be complete in your grooming as the rabbit will naturally want to groom itself once you are finished and this can potentially result in the ingestion of a lot of loose hair!

Based on my own experience, a pre-disposition to wool block can be inherited and this experience has been confirmed by other breeders. When considering the purchase of breeding stock, it is a good idea to ask the breeder what measures they take to prevent wool block and whether this has historically been a problem in their herd.