

Livestock Alert

Understanding and Managing Bloat in Cattle & Goats

Bloat (or ruminal tympany) is a life-threatening condition in ruminants (cattle, goats, sheep) where gas builds up in the rumen and reticulum, which the animal cannot expel through belching (eructation). This pressure compresses the heart and lungs, leading to distress and potentially rapid death.

Understanding the Two Main Types of Bloat

| Type of Bloat | Primary Cause | Description |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Frothy Bloat (Pasture Bloat) | Diet: Rapid consumption of lush, young legumes (alfalfa, clover) or high-concentrate feeds (grains). | Gas is trapped in a stable foam within the rumen contents, preventing the animal from belching it out. This is the most common and rapid-onset type of bloat. |
| 2. Free Gas Bloat | Obstruction/Mechanical: A physical block in the esophagus (e.g., large piece of apple, foreign object, tumor) or the animal being unable to rise (e.g., lying on its side for too long). | Gas accumulates as a pocket of free air because it cannot pass out of the rumen. In goats, a common cause is often a physical blockage. |

What to Watch Out For (Early Signs)

These are indicators that a problem is developing and require immediate attention and observation.

- **Swelling:** A distinct, rapidly increasing bulge on the **left side** of the animal, high up on the flank (where the rumen sits). In early or mild cases, this may only be visible high up.
 - **Discomfort/Restlessness:** Kicking at the belly, shifting weight, getting up and lying down frequently.
 - **Reduced Appetite:** Going off feed or water.
 - **Reduced Rumen Activity:** Fewer or weaker rumen contractions (listen or palpate the left flank).
 - **Frequent Urination/Defecation:** Trying to relieve the internal pressure.
 - **Salivation/Drooling:** Especially in goats, often associated with a possible esophageal obstruction.
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Signs it's an EMERGENCY (Severe Bloat)

Bloat can kill an animal in as little as one hour! If you observe these severe signs, contact your veterinarian **immediately** and be prepared to administer emergency relief as directed by your vet.

1. **Severe Abdominal Distension:** The left flank is extremely and visibly distended; the skin over the area is taut and drum-like when tapped.
2. **Respiratory Distress:** Labored, rapid, shallow, or open-mouth breathing; difficulty drawing a breath.
3. **Visible Distress/Pain:** Bellowing (cattle), crying out (goats), staggering, or an awkward gait.
4. **Collapse:** The animal is unable to stand, becomes weak, or is lying down and unresponsive. **Sudden death can occur.**

Prevention is Key!

Good management practices significantly reduce the risk of bloat:

- **Controlled Grazing:**
 - Avoid turning hungry animals out onto lush, young, or wet legume pastures (alfalfa, clover).
 - **Fill them up first** on hay or dry grass pasture before access to high-risk feed.
 - Introduce high-risk pastures *gradually* over several days to allow the rumen microbes to adapt.
 - Do not graze high-risk pastures when wet from dew or rain.
- **Diet Management:**
 - Maintain adequate **roughage/fiber** (hay or straw) in the diet, especially during periods of high-risk grazing.
 - Make any **dietary changes slowly** (especially grain/concentrates).
 - Cut up treats (apples, carrots) into small pieces to prevent esophageal obstruction.
- **Supplements:**
 - Use commercially available **anti-foaming supplements** (e.g., containing Poloxalene) in feed, mineral blocks, or licks, as a preventative measure, especially during high-risk times.

Disclaimer: *This handout is for informational purposes only. Bloat is a medical emergency. Always consult your veterinarian for proper diagnosis and treatment plans for your specific animals.*

