



**Mid Valley**  
Large Animal Service

# OROGASTRIC TUBING

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## How do I know if I'm in the esophagus or the windpipe?

Even with perfect technique, it's possible to pass the tube down the windpipe (trachea). It's **EXTREMELY IMPORTANT** to check that you're in the rumen or esophagus before adding any bloat releasing agents or fluids down the tube.

Check yourself:

1. Can you see the end of the tube as you move it in and out on the left side of the neck? If so, you're in the right place! If not, you may still be okay.
2. If you feel the animal's neck, you should feel two tubes - the trachea, and next to it, the tube in the esophagus. If you can only feel the trachea, you're in the wrong place.
3. If you suck on the end of the tube, is there resistance? If so, you're in the esophagus! If it's easy to suck air, and that air doesn't smell like feed, you're probably in the trachea. Blow on the tube. If you get bubbles or rumen-smelling air back, you're in the rumen!

Ask your vet to show you and help you practice with their guidance!

## How to Pass a Tube

1. Use an appropriately sized tube and speculum. For adult cattle, we usually use a 10' equine stomach tube, about 3/4" in diameter and a metal speculum, about 1.5" in diameter. For small ruminants or calves, we advise a 7' foal stomach tube, about 3/8" in diameter and a smaller pipe or syringe case, about 1" in diameter.
2. Position the animal appropriately. Ideally, animals should be standing with head straight out in front of them — cattle should be in a chute or headlock and small ruminants or calves should be well restrained by an assistant if possible. If the animal is laying down, place them on their sternum (sitting up) — do not pass a tube with an animal on its side, as they are more likely to pass fluids or saliva down into their lungs, leading to aspiration pneumonia.
3. Wet the tube in a bucket of water. Do not use lube, as anything passed down the esophagus has a chance of being aspirated into the lungs.
4. Measure approximately how much of the tube needs to be passed to make it into the rumen and mark it with a Sharpie. It is possible to pass so much tube that it turns itself around in the rumen, rendering it useless.
5. Gently place the speculum in the mouth and stabilize it with one hand.
6. With the other hand, start slowly passing the tube through the speculum. There will be some resistance when the tube reaches the back of the throat. Put gentle pressure on the tube and allow the animal to swallow the tube.
7. Continue to slowly pass the tube to the pre-measured mark.

## Caring for Your Tube

After each use, fully clean the inside and outside with warm soapy water. Rinse well and hang to dry.

Tubes should be stored in a clean, dry place out of direct sunlight, which can cause hardening of the tube and make it difficult to manipulate.

If no speculum is used or if the speculum shifts too much during tube passage, animals may easily damage the tube by chewing on it. Chewed portions will work for the time being, but makes the "suck test" difficult, as air is allowed to leak through the chewed holes. These teeth marks or bites are also very difficult to clean and can act as a home to bacteria. It's recommended that chewed sections be cut off and the new end flamed to smooth the edge and reduce drag the next time the tube is passed.

The use of a speculum is strongly advised, as it provides some protection for your hand that is passing the tube. It is also possible that the tube be chewed through and swallowed, which can cause other issues down the line.



If the animal is choked, the tube may meet resistance before you reach the mark — this is the feed obstruction. Gently press the tube through the obstruction and listen and smell the end of the tube for rumen air. You may have to remove and pass the tube multiple times to fully relieve the obstruction.

If the animal is bloated, once the tube is in the rumen, you should hear and smell a rush of air from the end of the tube. You may press on the left side of the animal to speed up the release of air. If you do not get air and the animal is still bloated, try slowly inserting and removing the tube until you find an air pocket. Please note that this only works for free gas bloat; frothy bloat requires the addition of a bloat reliever like TheraBloat, Bloat Release, or mineral oil.

## How to Remove a Tube

Once the choke or bloat is relieved, do not just pull the tube. This can leave feed material or rumen fluid in the tube that can end up in the lungs as you pull it out.

1. Make sure you've removed as much air as you can from bloated animals by pressing on their left side just behind the rib cage.
2. Kink the tube.
3. Smoothly and swiftly remove the tube entirely from the animal. Do not pause during the pull, as this can allow fluid or feed material left in the tube to pass into the lungs.

## Aftercare

Animals that have choked often require antibiotics and anti-inflammatories for a few days following choking, as they aspirate saliva and potentially feed material that often leads to aspiration pneumonia 3-5 days later.

Free gas bloat in calves and weanlings is often a result of pneumonia, which irritates the vagus nerve, interrupting normal function of the rumen contractions. These animals require anti-inflammatories and antibiotics to prevent future bloat. Other causes of free gas bloat may not require further treatment. Consult your veterinarian.