

Basic healthcare in rabbits



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity



Basic healthcare in rabbits

Rabbits are often described as “small pets” – but remember veterinary care can still be costly, so consider insurance when you get your pet.



Before heading to the surgery, phone the vet first and, outside normal hours, have a pen ready as you may be given another number to ring. Put your pet in a carry basket or box – you may not be the only patient in the waiting room.

Illnesses develop quickly with rabbits, and they often do not look ill until they are really unwell to avoid attracting attention from predators. If you think that your pet is unwell, contact the vet immediately – tomorrow might be too late.

How do you tell if your bunny is not well?

If your rabbit is quieter than normal, is sitting still and hunched up, does not want to move about, or has not eaten for more than 12 hours, contact your vet as soon as possible. Teeth grinding, severe diarrhoea, difficulties in breathing, straining to urinate, or signs of maggot attack, all need urgent veterinary attention.

Fly kills rabbit!

Not a tabloid sensation – sadly, this is often all too true. In the warmer months, all rabbits – even indoor rabbits – are at risk from attack by maggots. These eat into the flesh, causing severe damage and releasing toxins, which may produce shock, severe illness and death. The condition is called fly strike.

Maggots on your rabbit are an emergency, so contact the vet immediately. Sadly, in severe cases, euthanasia may be necessary. Intensive treatment is often needed and it can take weeks for large areas of damaged skin to heal.

The risk is increased by conditions causing dirty fur, which attracts flies. Rabbits that cannot clean themselves properly because they are overweight, arthritic, longhaired, have poor balance, are elderly, have a large dewlap, or suffer dental disease are particularly at risk. Open wounds and abscesses also increase the risk so seek the advice of your vet.

But fly strike can happen to any rabbit. You must check your rabbit at least twice daily underneath and around the bottom for faecal soiling, sore places and matted fur.

You can reduce the likelihood of fly strike by using fly screens on hutches and runs. Rearguard, a liquid treatment which is applied to the rear half of the rabbit to prevent fly eggs from hatching, is available from vets. It needs reapplication every ten weeks, and you must still check your pet daily. Avoid diarrhoea – make gradual changes to the diet over at least one week, especially with spring/early summer grass and leafy greens.



Staying healthy

Vaccination

All rabbits need vaccinations against myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease. Myxomatosis is a viral disease that is often fatal, although milder forms sometimes occur. It is spread by biting insects such as fleas and mosquitoes, and by contact with an infected rabbit. Vaccination, as with all vaccines, does not guarantee total protection, although vaccinated rabbits are more likely to survive the illness. In the UK it is currently recommended that the vaccine should be repeated every six months in high-risk areas (where there are lots of mosquitoes and/or wild rabbits, and flat marshy areas) and annually elsewhere.

Annual vaccinations are best given in spring, when biting insects start to become more common. Ask your vet for a suitable product to treat your rabbits – and cats and dogs – for fleas, and protect against mosquitoes. Avoid having stagnant water in your garden and use mosquito-proof screens on hutches.

Viral haemorrhagic disease is also usually a killer disease. The virus survives well in the environment and is easily spread between rabbits, by other animals and wild birds, or by foods, such as hay or vegetables, which have been contaminated by infected wild rabbits, or even by the wind. All rabbits, even indoor ones, need annual vaccination, and you need to reduce their chance of coming into contact with the virus. Keep wild rabbits away with

rabbit-proof fencing. Keep the areas round the hutch clean to avoid attracting wild birds and rodents, and prevent them from getting into hutches and runs. Do not pick green foods from areas where there are wild rabbits.

Dietary matters

The digestive system of the rabbit has more in common with a horse than with dogs or cats. Rabbits need a high fibre diet, as without fibre their bowel cannot function properly. Good quality grass or grass hay is the best source, but check that it is free from dust, mould, and grass seeds which might get into their eyes.

Feed small quantities of fresh vegetables (see *the All About Pets leaflet, Caring for your rabbit (S8)*), and remember cereal-based diets (the muesli-type) are high in sugar and low in minerals, and therefore should not be given. Small quantities of high-fibre pellets are a better choice. Introduce new foods gradually to

prevent digestive upsets. A peculiarity of rabbits is caecotrophy, which means they eat special “faecal” pellets. These are paste-like, covered in jelly-like mucus, and similar to faeces (but softer and bulkier). They are eaten daily when passed, often during grooming at night, and contain essential nutrients.

If your rabbit stops eating or passing faeces, see a vet as soon as possible. Many problems, as well as digestive upsets, will put your pet off food. Examples include dental disease and stress. Maintaining food intake is vital or further problems may follow.

Diarrhoea means a visit to the vet, immediately if it is severe and the rabbit is unwell. Mild diarrhoea often indicates insufficient fibre in the diet, too many sugary treats or a change in diet. Look around to see what your pet is eating.



Infections do occur in rabbits, especially when young, but they are relatively uncommon. Pale-coloured, strong-smelling faeces caked at the back end, along with the normal faeces in the run, may be uneaten caecotrophs, and often indicate problems such as dental disease or arthritis, reducing mobility. Again, see the vet, and guard against fly strike.

Grooming

Wild rabbits groom each other – it is a social activity. Pet bunnies with a short coat need grooming weekly, or more often if they are long-haired. Longhairs can be clipped instead – ask your vet to demonstrate how it is done.

Rabbits moult twice a year in the wild, but pet rabbits may moult more frequently. The hair seems to come out in handfuls and bald patches may develop. Moulting often starts on the head and spreads down the back to the tummy, but does not always follow a pattern.

There is sometimes a distinct line between new and old fur. Groom frequently during moulting because swallowing lots of fur can cause a blockage of the bowel. Pluck loose fur with your fingers, or dampen your hands and massage to remove the loose coat. Check the quantity of faeces daily and if it is reduced or dry, consult the vet. Make sure plenty of hay is available.

Snuffles

Rabbits are prone to respiratory diseases so good ventilation is essential. Do not keep your pet in a damp and dusty garden shed. Avoid dusty hay and strong smells – clean out the hutch regularly. See the vet if your rabbit has a runny nose, eyes or breathing difficulties. Dental problems can also cause a runny nose or eyes (see the *All About Pets leaflet, Rabbits and surgery (S10)*).

Exercise

Rabbits need daily exercise – preferably outdoors – to keep their bones healthy. But protect them from predators such as cats.

Avoid stress

Chronic stress can harm your rabbit's health. Keep threatening predators away and watch for bullying by other pets (including rabbits). Provide hiding places.

Weight watching

Does your pet have a podgy tummy or a big dewlap? If so, he is probably overweight, and you need to reduce his food – especially treats and pellets. If your pet is losing weight (you may be able to feel an obvious backbone), see the vet – it may indicate a problem such as dental disease. It is a good idea to weigh your bunny monthly.

Check ups

Nails

If the nails are long and curving, you can trim them but avoid the pink bit (called the quick) in the middle. This hurts and will bleed if it is cut. Ask the vet to show you how to do it. Make sure your rabbit is getting enough exercise.

Coat and ears

Check the coat for scurf, dandruff, or itchy sores, and look in the ears for crusty wax. Fleas are not a big problem, but rabbits can get dog and cat fleas so get a suitable product from the vet if you have other animals. They can also get ringworm, which is a fungal infection, and infestations of microscopic creatures known as mites. Some types of mite live in the ears, causing severe irritation. In all cases, prompt veterinary treatment is needed.

Toilet troubles

Check your rabbit's faeces daily. If there are changes in colour, consistency or amount, consult your vet. Rabbit urine varies in colour, from pale yellow to red, depending on the diet, and it can be cloudy. If it suddenly turns red, consult your vet who can test whether blood is present. If your rabbit's fur is wet with urine, your pet is straining as if constipated, or has lost normal toilet training, see your vet – there may be problems.

Nursing a sick rabbit

Keep your pet in a warm but well-ventilated area. Provide plenty of soft bedding and wipe away discharges from the nose and eyes. Check the rear end for soiling by faeces or urine and offer different types of soft food, including fresh grass if possible, or try bits of apple or pear.

You can buy high fibre liquid foods from the vet and feed them with a syringe, but be careful to do so this slowly so you do not choke your pet. Ask the vet to show you how. Alternatively, soften pellets in warm water and then liquidise them. High sugar baby foods should be avoided. However, if your pet will not take anything, inform the vet right away.



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