

Rabbit “Tune-Ups”: Wellness Checks

By Debby Widolf

Rabbits are masters at hiding illness, so giving your rabbit a “tune-up” or wellness check every two to three months is good preventive medicine and will help you know what is normal for your rabbit and what might need medical attention. If your bunny is a challenge when handled, get a friend to help you with the tune-up. Consult your vet, vet tech or an experienced rabbit person if you are unsure how to trim toenails or clean scent glands. So, let’s get started!



Eyes. Healthy rabbit eyes are clear and bright. If you pull up or down on the eyelid, the eye tissue should be pink, not red or very pale. Red, inflamed eye tissue and/or discharge from the eyes could be a sign of infection. Very pale tissue can also be a sign of illness. In these cases, your rabbit needs to see a veterinarian. Also, rabbits have a “third eyelid,” a thin white membrane that protects the eye. If this third eyelid is prominent, it could mean that the rabbit is stressed.

Ears. A small penlight can help you get a good look into your rabbit’s ears. Look for wax or dirt buildup. A dark crusty material may mean the rabbit has ear mites and needs treatment from a veterinarian. If the ears need a general cleaning, use warm water or saline solution and a gauze or cotton pad to gently wipe out the ears.

Nose. A rabbit’s nose should be free from discharge. If you do see discharge from the nose, consult with your veterinarian. Rabbits wipe their noses on the inside of their front paws, so also check the front paws for crustiness or wetness.

Chin. Rabbits have a scent gland under their chins. If you see a waxy buildup under the chin that is matted with the rabbit’s hair, carefully trim it away or wipe it off with warm water. If your bunny drinks water from a bowl, it can sometimes result in a little irritation under the chin. If the underside of the chin looks inflamed, consult your veterinarian.

Teeth. Gently pull the upper and lower lips back. You should see the upper front teeth aligning with the lowers and a slight overbite. If the top teeth are very long and growing over the lower teeth, your rabbit’s teeth are maloccluded. The rabbit needs to see a veterinarian to have the teeth trimmed or possibly removed. Maloccluded teeth can make it hard for the rabbit to eat and drink, potentially resulting in significant health problems or death.

Another thing to do is to check the rabbit’s mouth area from the outside. Look for any bumps or painful spots that may indicate a dental abscess. If you see anything suspicious, consult your veterinarian.

Feet. The most common problem with a rabbit’s feet is sore hocks or heels. Sores can develop when a rabbit sits on a wire or rough surface in her cage or enclosure. (Wire-bottom cages are not recommended for bunnies.) These foot sores can be quite painful and can also be a vehicle for infection. Take your rabbit to the veterinarian if you see foot sores, especially if you see open sores.

If needed, keep your rabbit's nails trimmed. A penlight is helpful to locate the "quick," the portion of the nail containing blood. Hold your thumb and index finger over the quick and then cut the nail above your fingers. That way, you know you're not cutting into the vein. You might want to team up with another person when trimming nails. If you do nick the quick, use pressure and styptic powder to stop the bleeding.

Scent glands. Rabbits have scent glands on either side of their genitals that emit a musk-like scent. The glands can become impacted with a dark, wax-like substance. Gently wipe away the material with a gauze pad or Q-tip soaked in warm water. A buildup of this material is normal, but it can lead to infections, especially in older rabbits. If you can smell the musky odor, it is probably time to clean the glands. Have your veterinarian, vet tech or a knowledgeable rabbit person show you how to find and clean the glands. While you are checking the scent glands, note any caked-on feces or urine burn on the rabbit's bottom. This could be a symptom of illness.

Tune-Up Tips

- Partner with another person who is comfortable handling rabbits.
- Always provide support to the rabbit's back.
- If the rabbit seems stressed, try again another time or do the tune-up in short sessions.
- Ask an animal professional to demonstrate any tune-up tasks you are unsure about, such as how to clean scent glands, clip nails and check teeth.

Fur and skin. A soft, shiny coat is an indicator of good health. As part of the tune-up, run your hands through the rabbit's fur. Check for any skin irritations, loss of fur and fleas or fur mites. Fur mites can be detected by white scabs or crusty skin, but those things could also be dandruff. The only sure way to tell if your bunny has mites or dandruff is to have your animal hospital look at a fur sample under the microscope. Be aware that many flea and tick prevention products used for cats and dogs are toxic to rabbits. The product called Revolution contains ivermectin, which is generally safe for rabbits, but always consult your veterinarian before giving your rabbit any of these products.

Tip: To find a vet who's experienced in treating rabbits, go to the House Rabbit Society's website at www.rabbit.org/vets.

Rabbits shed about three times a year and some enjoy a gentle brushing. Long-haired rabbits need brushing frequently because the fur grows fast and quickly mats if it isn't brushed. Use extreme caution when cutting out matted fur. Keep your fingers over the skin line and cut above your fingers with blunted-tip scissors.

A rabbit should never be immersed in water for a bath because it can cause shock. "Spot cleaning" is OK for the soiled bottom. Rabbits are generally very clean animals and, unless they are physically unable, they do a good job of keeping themselves clean.

Lumps and bumps. While you are running your hands through the rabbit's fur, check for any abnormal lumps, bumps or scabs. Check the tummy, head, between the legs and back. Have your veterinarian look at anything suspicious.

Debby Widolf is the coordinator of development and advocacy for the Best Friends Bunny House.

See also: Grooming Your Rabbit, Your Rabbit's Health