

Your Rabbit's Health

Here's some basic information about factors that may affect your rabbit's health:

Red Urine

A rabbit's urine can vary in color from clear to yellow to brown to bright red. None of these colors are a cause for alarm unless there are additional symptoms – such as sitting and straining to urinate, loss of appetite or a noticeable fluctuation in temperature. When you see red urine, don't panic; it doesn't necessarily indicate blood in the urine. It can be caused by the pigment in food, such as certain vegetables. But, keep your eyes open for other signs that may indicate a problem. The red color will usually be gone in a day or two, but it can last much longer. Actual blood in the urine looks like urine with red specks. If you're in doubt, don't risk your bunny's health – have your veterinarian test for blood in the urine.



Shedding

Rabbits normally shed their hair every three months, alternating between heavy and light periods. Because rabbits are very clean, they like to groom themselves and/or their companions. Regularly brushing your rabbit will remove excess hair, keeping his coat healthy and preventing the ingestion of too much hair into the stomach. Use a fine-toothed pet comb or soft brush to groom your rabbit. You can also gently pull out the loose tufts of hair that stick out above his coat. Feeding your bunny unlimited amounts of timothy or grass hay will help him to pass hair through his stomach and keep his gastrointestinal system running smoothly.

Gastrointestinal Stasis

Gastrointestinal stasis – the slowing down or stopping of the gastrointestinal tract – can occur for many reasons. Left untreated, the slowdown or cessation of normal intestinal movement can result in a painful death in a relatively short period of time. Symptoms of gastrointestinal stasis can include very small or no fecal pellets. In some cases, small fecal pellets will be encased in clear or yellowish mucus. A bloated stomach and signs of pain (such as teeth grinding, lethargy, sitting very still, and not eating or drinking) are also signs of gastrointestinal problems. If any of these symptoms occur, your rabbit needs to see the veterinarian immediately!

Teeth

Rabbit teeth are constantly growing, which is why they are always chewing – to help keep their teeth the proper length. Some rabbits, however, have misaligned or maloccluded teeth, which do not wear down properly and continue to grow. A rabbit with this condition needs to have his teeth clipped periodically so that he can eat. Your vet can do this for you or can show you how to do it yourself.

Very rarely, when there's extreme malocclusion, a bunny will need to have his front teeth removed. These rabbits do just fine as long as you cut their food and hay into small pieces. You can easily see misalignment of the front teeth, but your bunny's back teeth may need to be checked by your vet. Indicators that the back teeth may be a problem are wetness on your bunny's chin, caused by drooling; loud grinding of the teeth; and difficulty eating. Check your rabbit's teeth during each grooming session.

Sneezing

Sneezing may or may not be a sign of trouble. If sneezing is accompanied by a runny nose and/or runny eyes, you should take your rabbit to the vet immediately, especially if there is also a loss of appetite. If the rabbit is sneezing but has no other symptoms and is eating well, the cause may be allergies or even nothing at all, but keep a close eye out for the development of any other symptoms and keep in touch with your rabbit vet.

Parasites

Rabbits can get fleas and ticks. Because rabbits are very sensitive to chemicals, be careful about the products you use on your rabbit, as well as the products you use to treat your home and yard. Some flea and tick products can be deadly for rabbits, so check with a rabbit vet before using any of these. If you treat your yard, do not allow your rabbit in it for at least a week, and only after you've watered the yard thoroughly to wash off any residual chemicals.

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

Listed below are other common parasites that your rabbit might get:

Skin mites live on the skin dander of rabbits and will cause your rabbit to scratch. If left untreated, they will eventually cause thick crusts to develop on the rabbit's body. Your vet can administer a drug called Ivermectin to treat this problem.

Ear mites cause rabbits to shake their heads frequently and scratch their ears. If left untreated, a middle-ear infection could develop, which may cause a problem with the bunny's balance. Ivermectin is also recommended for ear mites.

Internal parasites called coccidia can infect the small intestine. Symptoms can range from a loss of appetite to chronic diarrhea, which should be treated as a life-threatening emergency. Testing for coccidia is as easy as taking a fecal sample to your vet.

If your rabbits are free of any of these parasites, it is unlikely that they will get them as long as they are kept inside, their home is kept clean, and they are not exposed to other animals that may carry these parasites.

Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is not carried by rabbits! It is a human disease that may seriously damage the central nervous system, especially of infants. Many pregnant women and their doctors incorrectly believe that rabbit feces carry this disease. Rabbits cannot carry or reproduce the spores that are harmful. Unfortunately, many rabbits are abandoned because of an unfounded fear of toxoplasmosis.

Amoxicillin Danger

Amoxicillin is very toxic to rabbits, so don't ever let a veterinarian give your rabbit this antibiotic, which is pink in color and smells like bubble gum. Amoxicillin and other forms of penicillin kill the "good" bacteria in the rabbit's intestines and can cause other organs to malfunction.

There are other antibiotics that can safely be given to rabbits, such as Chloromycetin, Tetracycline and Baytril. Occasionally, a rabbit cannot tolerate an antibiotic (some signs are a loss of appetite and diarrhea) and another may have to be tried instead. If your vet says that just this once amoxicillin will be okay or he/she has no other antibiotic to dispense, find another vet!

Surgery

Contrary to the procedure with other animals, food and water should not be withheld from a rabbit the evening before surgery, but should be taken away the morning of surgery. If the veterinary office staff directs you to withhold food the night before, discuss the request with your vet. Generally, the reason that food is withheld from cats and dogs is the possibility of vomiting during surgery, but rabbits cannot throw up, so it's not a danger with rabbits. Withholding food and water is harmful to rabbits and causes a longer recovery time from surgery.

To assist with the recovery process, as soon as the rabbit awakens from surgery, he should be encouraged to eat. After surgery, to help the bunny begin eating again, offer him a variety of his favorite fresh foods.

Emergencies

Ask your rabbit vet about the proper procedure in the event of an emergency that occurs after office hours or on a holiday. Some veterinarians will refer you to an "on-call" vet and others will send you to an emergency clinic. Keep in mind that many clinics do not have exotic vets on staff. They will stabilize your rabbit, but you will have to follow up with your rabbit vet the next day.

Conditions that require emergency care (within 24 hours) include diarrhea with listlessness, loss of appetite with bloat and/or abdominal gurgling, loss of appetite with labored breathing, loss of appetite with runny nose or eyes, head tilt or loss of coordination, paralysis, incontinence, abscesses and/or swelling, any sudden behavior change, a thick nose or eye discharge, and any sign of severe pain (loud teeth-grinding, hunched posture, shallow or rapid breathing, excessive grooming, reduced activity or facing the corner with head down).

Talk to your vet about how to take your rabbit's temperature. A rabbit's normal temperature is 101 to 103 degrees. A high temperature can indicate infection; a low temperature (below 100) could mean shock or another medical emergency. If your rabbit has a low temperature, pack warm bottles around the bunny, wrap her in blankets, and get her to a veterinarian immediately.

See also: Do-It-Yourself: Rabbit Health Checkup