

Bunny Health – Basics 101

Unlike cats and dogs, rabbits do not require vaccinations. They are “prey” animals and will hide signs of illness as long as possible. Often, when illness is noticed, it is too late to help. Therefore, it is critical to check your rabbit frequently for signs of illness. Unusual bumps, fur loss, abnormally small feces, diarrhea, gas or gurgling in the gut, straining to defecate or urinate, hunched appearance, prolonged sitting in the litter pan, and loud grinding of teeth are all considered signs of illness and should be investigated promptly.

Gastrointestinal problems

There are two basic things to know about the normal functions of a rabbit’s digestive system:

1. Rabbits obtain nutrients from bacterial fermentation of food in a large organ of the bowel called the cecum. Almost any health problem can be “referred” to the gastrointestinal tract and cause “gut stasis.” Any stress, whether physical or “emotional,” can result in the slowing or stoppage of normal intestinal movement. When this occurs, normal bacterial fermentation stops and is replaced by fermentation by harmful bacteria. These bacteria (Clostridium) overgrow and produce toxins that can kill a rabbit very quickly. Any cessation of or reduction in the number of fecal pellets needs to be investigated promptly. Monitoring fecal pellet production by cleaning the litter pan daily helps to recognize this problem early when treatment is most likely to be beneficial.
2. Rabbits cannot vomit. Any foreign matter or irritant that is ingested must stay in the gastrointestinal system until it can be defecated. Rabbits groom themselves a lot and, like cats, can develop hair balls which can slow gut movement. There are many methods of treating hair ball problems depending on the severity of the problem. However, the best treatment is prevention by feeding the proper diet --- plenty of grass hay and free access to fresh, clean water to drink.

Seek veterinary help immediately if your rabbit has an appetite loss for more than 24 hours.

Teeth

Rabbits’ teeth continue to grow throughout their life and may grow up to 1 inch per month. One of the reasons that rabbits chew so much is to keep the teeth from overgrowing. They need tough material to chew on to accomplish this such as: untreated wood, branches, plenty of grass hay. When the teeth grow out of alignment, they can produce sores on the tongue or insides of the cheeks. Teeth can be trimmed when the teeth over-grow. However, (again) the best treatment is prevention. Provide bunny with plenty of tough chewing material.

Weepy Eye

An eye infection can cause blockage of the tear duct. The discharge from the eye will cause irritation of the skin under the eye which results in fur loss. If the blockage continues for too long the duct may become scarred and not be able to be opened. Use of an appropriate ophthalmic antibiotic may correct the problem. Sometimes it is necessary to have the duct flushed under anesthesia.

Respiratory Illness

Discharges from the nostrils, cough, and even discharge from the eyes can indicate possible respiratory problems. A variety of infectious agents can be at fault and, often, a bacterial culture of the discharge is needed to determine which treatment is the most appropriate. Upper respiratory infections can progress to pneumonia, head tilt, or abscess. Respiratory or ocular discharges may indicate a hidden tooth problem so the mouth should be examined as well.

Head Tilt

Head tilt is usually the result of an inner ear infection. The balance mechanism is affected which causes the rabbit to be “dizzy.” He may stagger and roll during the initial stages of this infection. Be sure to keep him in a small, padded space during this period. These infections are usually treatable with use of the proper antibiotic. A bacterial culture and sensitivity test may be required along with a several weeks regimen of antibiotics. It may take longer for the balance to be restored to normal. Gentle massage of the neck muscles will help relieve spasms. Gradually allowing a larger area in which to move will help restore balance. Patience, proper medication and physical therapy are the keys to recovery.

Antibiotics

Certain classes of antibiotics can result in an imbalance of bacteria in the digestive tract leading to gastrointestinal stasis, toxin formation, illness and death. Do not use antibiotics in rabbits without proper supervision of a veterinarian.