

Medical Know-How Your Rabbit Can Live By

Identify illness in your rabbit with these signs.

By Rabbits USA editors

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Rabbits, like most prey animals, are very good at hiding illness. Your pet can't tell you when something is wrong — but, oftentimes, its body can. It's up to you to detect when something is amiss. Familiarize yourself with what is and what is not normal for your rabbit — rabbits are different, in many ways, from cats and dogs and therefore have different health needs and concerns.

Keep a diligent lookout for changes in your pet's demeanor and body constitution. (Have your vet demonstrate how to do a home health-examination on your rabbit.) Without a doubt, your rabbit's best defense against disease and ill health is you. Here's a guide to some common symptoms and what they may mean.

Pasteurellosis

Signs Observed

Nasal and/or eye discharge, "snuffles," sneezing, yellow-stained paws

What It Might Mean & What To Do

Upper respiratory infection, often due to Pasteurellosis (caused by the *Pasteurella multocida* bacterium), commonly referred to as the "snuffles."

Pasteurellosis can affect rabbits housed both indoors and outdoors. *Pasteurella multocida* bacterium is found in the nose and sinus and is usually kept under control by the rabbit's immune system. If a rabbit's immune system is compromised (due to stress or underlying disease), the bacterium can proliferate in tissues or organs. It is also a contagious disease that can spread by direct contact with an infected rabbit, contact with contaminated objects, or a doe (mother) can pass it on to her kits. *Pasteurella* can also cause disease at the site of a bite or puncture wound. Any animal can carry the *Pasteurella* organism, but it is most commonly found in rabbits and cats.

A rabbit with nasal or eye discharge and/or frequent sneezing or dental abscesses should be evaluated by a veterinarian. Likewise, a rabbit with yellow-stained paws might be rubbing its nose/eye area due to the irritation, thus staining its paws with mucous discharge. A vet can do a blood test for *multocida* infection and prescribe an appropriate treatment plan, such as administering a course of antibiotics.

Keep your rabbit's area clean, which includes diligent litter box cleaning to prevent ammonia buildup, which can irritate a rabbit's respiratory system, and provide a good diet. Also, frequently check your rabbit's teeth for dental problems (misaligned teeth, overgrowth) to prevent dental abscesses, which can lead to a more serious infection.

Ear Mite Infection/Fly Strike

Signs Observed

Skin problems: thick crusty/itchy outer ear; dandruff/dry skin; lump under skin

What It Might Mean & What To Do

A crust-like appearance on the outer ear canal signifies ear mite infestation. A rabbit with ear mite infestation might repeatedly shake its head and scratch its ears. If left untreated, ear mite infestation can lead to serious infection and cause the rabbit's health to deteriorate. It can also result in wryneck (head tilt), in which the rabbit's head permanently tilts to one side.

A rabbit with dry, itchy skin, hair loss and dandruff is showing signs of mange. This skin infestation is caused by the rabbit mite *Cheyletiella parasitovorax*, which is also contagious to people.

A lump under the skin, neck, armpit, back or rump can signify a condition called fly strike, which is caused by fly larvae or maggots invading the tissue under the skin. Fly strike is most common in rabbits housed outdoors and is more often seen

in rabbits that are overweight (which makes it more difficult to reach and thoroughly clean the hindquarters during self-grooming), have moist dermatitis or have fecal matter matted to the fur — both of which attract flies that then lay their eggs on the rabbit's skin and damp fur.

Any rabbit with visible changes in skin or fur condition needs to be seen by a veterinarian for treatment to clear up the condition and to prevent it from becoming worse. A rabbit experiencing mites, mange or fly strike infestation is indeed suffering. Left untreated, it can progress to death.

Heatstroke

Signs Observed

Rapid, shallow breathing, drooling, lying flat, pale gums, weakness, lack of appetite

What It Might Mean & What To Do

Rabbits are very susceptible to heatstroke and may overheat in temperatures of 80 degrees Fahrenheit and above, if not given adequate shade, ventilation and access to fresh water. Heatstroke is a medical emergency and should be treated as such, because a rabbit can quickly fall into a coma and die.

Indoor rabbits should be housed in a cool spot, away from heaters, fireplaces and direct/intense sunlight from windows and glass doors. Rabbits housed outdoors should have shade available to them at all times during the day as well as adequate air circulation through their hutch/enclosure.

Never leave your rabbit unattended in a car on a warm day and, if you must transport your pet during the warm part of the day, use your car's air conditioning (however, don't place your rabbit directly in front of the air conditioner).

Offer your rabbit a frozen water bottle (i.e. fill an empty liter-sized soda bottle and freeze it) for it to lay against during particularly warm weather or high humidity. If you suspect heatstroke, spray your rabbit with cool (not frigid) water, and transport it to the vet.

Broken Back

Signs Observed

Inability to walk or hop, partial paralysis

What It Might Mean & What To Do

A broken back is an all-too common rabbit injury and is usually caused by incorrect handling. Rabbits startle easily and can thrash about in an attempt to prevent unwanted holding/handling. If the rabbit's back or hind area is not securely supported and/or the rabbit falls from a person's arms, a spine fracture can be the result. A fractured spine often leaves the rabbit permanently paralyzed and unable to control its bladder. Refrain from grabbing your rabbit as it flees from you or picking it up against its will, unless it is absolutely necessary.

Dental Malocclusion

Sign Observed

Weight loss, reluctance or refusal to eat, slobbering

What It Might Mean & What To Do

Teeth that don't align properly begin to wear unevenly, which leads to sharp, uneven edges that cause cuts to the rabbit's mouth and tongue. Teeth misalignment is called dental malocclusion. A rabbit can slowly starve to death from malocclusion because it makes eating painful. Malocclusion can affect both the front teeth (the incisors) and the molars (cheek teeth).

Unless the malocclusion involves the more visible front incisors, it may not be easy for the owner to notice. If your pet has unexplained weight loss, refuses to eat or has difficulty eating, take it to a rabbit-savvy vet for a dental examination. If malocclusion is diagnosed, treatment usually consists of regular dental trimming by a veterinarian for the life of the rabbit. A vet often performs this procedure with the rabbit under general anesthesia.

A rabbit's teeth grow continuously so to keep the teeth at a proper length and in proper alignment, a rabbit needs adequate chewing opportunities to keep teeth in check and evenly worked. A diet of mostly pellets, even if supplemented with vegetables, is generally not enough to wear down the teeth evenly, because these foods mostly require the teeth to

move up and down. Hay is needed as well because it requires more of a side-to-side grinding motion, which prevents points from forming.

Shock

Signs Observed

Pale gums, cool extremities (including ears), closed or glossy eyes, increased breathing, increased heart rate, weak pulse

What It Might Mean & What To Do

Your rabbit may be in shock, which can be caused by a dramatic injury, blood loss, an infection or an adverse reaction to medication. Shock is a life-threatening condition that warrants immediate veterinary care. If your rabbit appears to be in shock, wrap it in a towel, put it in a travel carrier and head to the vet.

Urinary Infection

Signs Observed

Difficulty urinating, change in urine color

What It Might Mean & What To Do

A change in urine color can be caused by the type of vegetable matter a rabbit has eaten or it can be due to a bladder infection. (Because it is often difficult for the average pet owner to distinguish one from another, act on the side of caution and see a veterinarian.) A diet high in calcium can cause urinary sludge, which has a white or cream-colored appearance.

Straining to urinate, difficulty urinating or a change in the color of the urine is the sign of a medical emergency and warrants immediate veterinary care.