



Rabbit Care

Eyes

Discharge from a rabbit's eyes can be caused for a number of reasons. Any discharge **MUST** be seen by a vet.

Dental problems can cause the eyes to weep as the tooth roots run very close to the tear ducts.

If the rabbit's tear ducts become blocked for any reason, the tears will overflow back into its eyes and so cause a discharge. Tear ducts can be flushed by your vet with the rabbit under sedation.

If eye drops are prescribed, please ask the Nurse to show you how to prescribe these.

Flystrike

This is a common condition where flies lay their eggs on the rabbit's fur, which turn into maggots and feed on flesh causing pain, infection and toxic change. Flystrike can develop in a matter of hours so immediate attention by a veterinary surgeon is vital. Twice daily checking of your rabbit's rear end is important as flies are particularly attracted to wet and faecal matter, therefore flystrike often affects this area first.

Digestive System

If a rabbit stops eating it will lose weight and become ill quickly. If your rabbit hasn't eaten for 24 hours, you must contact your vet. Eating less than normal, or favouring fresh green stuff over hay may be due to a tooth problem so we will need to see it if it has not eaten its normal quota for a few days.

Rabbits' unique digestive system means they need to digest some of their food twice. They do this by eating their own faeces that is passed during the night. Rabbit faeces are usually small round dry pellets, but these motions are different. They contain plenty of nutrients that have been broken down, but can only be absorbed by the rabbit if eaten again.

The night faeces, called caecotrophes, are soft and coated in mucus. They are usually eaten direct from the anus so they are not seen. However, an overweight rabbit, or one suffering from dental disease, may not be able to reach them. They will then become stuck in the fur around the anus. If these are left to build up, they encourage fly strike and this can result in maggot infestation, feeding on the faeces and on the rabbit's flesh.

Checking your rabbit once a day for faecal soiling is very important. If you do notice maggots on your rabbit, remove as many as possible and call your vet immediately. Caecotrophes are commonly mistaken for diarrhoea. Diarrhoea can cause dehydration in rabbits and, if detected, the rabbit must see a vet as soon as possible.

Neutering

We recommend neutering of sexually mature rabbits. This will ensure that two rabbits do not quickly become two dozen! Rabbits start to become sexually mature from 4-5 months old and a litter size can

range from 5 to 8 kits. Failing to neuter can also mean your rabbit suffers from mood swings and aggression, with the spraying of urine to mark their territory. This is why most house rabbits are neutered. Neutered pets are generally friendlier and can be kept together without fighting and with no risk of population growth. Spaying eliminates the development of cancer in the womb in does.



Teeth

If rabbits are fed a correct diet of hay, grass and pellets they should not have any dental problems. Correct diet provides all the essential nutrients and dietary fibre and ensures that the rabbit's eating is spread over enough time to promote essential wear and tear on its teeth.

Feeding a rabbit solely on a commercial food mixture is more likely to lead to the development of problems. The rabbit will eat quickly and avoid natural wear to its teeth. It will also become choosy, selecting the parts of the food mixture it prefers and leaving the balance. This can lead to obesity and Vitamin D deficiency.

The first signs of dental problems will be dribbling from the mouth. This may also show up as sticky deposits on its front paws as they are used to clean the mouth. It is essential that you seek veterinary advice at this point. If you do not, your rabbit will lose appetite and stop eating as mouth soreness arises from overlong teeth abrading its tongue and mouth.

Overgrown front teeth (incisors) can be clipped if they are not too bad. However these are often a sign of problems further inside the mouth and it will probably be necessary to sedate or anaesthetise the rabbit to undertake a full examination and either clip or file down any problem teeth. Severely loosened teeth may be better off removed.

Once the teeth are reduced and smoothed, damage to the tongue and mouth will heal and appetite will usually return to normal. However, the problem can recur and we will

usually need to see the rabbit again every few months, or sooner if the dribbling or poor appetite is seen.



Vaccination

We offer vaccination against the two fatal diseases which affect rabbits; Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD=RHD). Once vaccinated, immunity develops within three weeks. We recommend annual boosters.

The combined vaccination can be given from 5 weeks of age.

Diseases are passed on by bloodsucking insects such as fleas and mosquitos, by direct contact with other infected rabbits, or contaminated food.

We also offer vaccination against Viral Haemorrhagic Disease 2 (RHDV2), a new variant of VHD/RHD. This is an additional vaccine which does not cover myxomatosis and should be

kept 2 weeks apart from the annual booster. We recommend a booster for RHDV2 every 6 months to provide good immunity and protection.

Respiration

Most rabbits acquire bacteria called Pasteurella in their respiratory systems when they are young. This may cause disease and some young rabbits die of Pasteurella pneumonia. Most rabbits survive their initial exposure to the bug, but live with it in their airways for the rest of their lives. However, stress or another infection can bring the bacteria to the fore. It is important, therefore, to keep your rabbit as healthy as possible.

Respiratory problems usually present a runny nose, difficulty in breathing, or your rabbit may simply seem off-colour and go off its food. If your rabbit shows any of these signs, consult your vet as soon as possible.



Housing

Rabbits are social animals and live best in opposite sex neutered pairs. Rabbits are sometimes kept with guinea pigs, but this is best avoided because serious bullying problems and transmission of diseases between different species can occur.

Most rabbits are housed in traditional hutches and many spend their entire life in a small wooden hutch. As with any restrictive enclosure, this is far from ideal.

Rabbits must have access to a run or a safely enclosed garden to get enough exercise and to enable them to display normal behaviour. Runs must be strong and not allow them to escape by jumping or digging, or be at risk from predators.

Size is important! Hutches must be long enough for your rabbit to do at least 3 hops from one end to the other, and tall enough for them to stand upright on their hind legs.

All hutches, especially those made of wood, need proper cleaning. The toilet area must be cleaned daily and the entire hutch at least weekly. Poor hygiene will quickly lead to serious health problems.

Keep the hutch out of direct sunlight, rabbits are prone to heat stroke. You should also locate the hutch in an area free from drafts and ensure it is rainproof.

Bedding must be absorbent and comfortable. We suggest woodchips, but avoid the scented variety sold in pet shops, the scent can mask smells but encourages inadequate cleaning. Some rabbits like straw but, if you use this, you must also provide hay for your rabbit to eat. Your rabbit will enjoy some toys in its run or hutch, especially large tubes or boxes to be used as bolt holes. It will also enjoy toilet roll tubes and plastic flower pots to throw around and destroy.

Diet

Offering the correct food is very important, both for nutrition and to avoid obesity and dental problems. Grass is the perfect food, either as hay or concentrated pellets, because it provides a balance of nutrients and enough fibre to keep the unique digestive system running well. It also encourages steady grazing throughout the day, a process which generates enough wear on the teeth to prevent excess growth and damage to the tongue. The descending order of priority is: good quality hay, pellets at recommended quantity and fresh green stuff (e.g. carrot, kale or broccoli) as dessert.

Avoid commercial rabbit mixtures. These encourage your rabbit to choose his favourite bits, leaving the rest. He will also get his food in too short a time, reducing the necessary wear on teeth and leading to obesity.

Handling

Rabbits are a natural prey animal. They spend all their lives hoping not to get eaten! This is why they like to hide away in their hutch and also why they are not too keen on being handled, unless they really trust you. Always approach quietly and talk to your rabbit so that it is not startled. To pick it up, stroke its head to reassure it, then lift it gently by its scruff while supporting its bottom. Try to hold it close to your body while you carry it around and if it struggles when lifted, let it go to calm down. Struggling or, even worse, being dropped can cause injury. Children should be encouraged not to cuddle or lift the rabbit. If holding is essential, make sure the child is sitting or kneeling on the ground.

Our nurses offer FREE rabbit consults all year round giving you advice on all aspects of caring for your pet.

Please contact any of our Small Animal receptions to arrange a nurse consultation for your rabbit.

Blackmore: 01277 823858

Billericay: 01277 655524

Writtle: 01245 423162

Rabbit facts

Life Expectancy: 6 - 13 years

Sexual Maturity: 4 - 5 months in small breeds, 5-8 months in large breeds

Average litter size: 5 - 8 kits

Weaning Age: 4 - 6 weeks

Heart Rate: 130 -325 beats per minute

Breathing Rate: 32 - 60 per minute

