
Health

Myxomatosis and Haemorrhagic Viral Disease are two serious infectious diseases which affect pet rabbits, almost always resulting in death.

Myxomatosis is spread by blood sucking insects, such as fleas. The disease causes puffy swellings around the eyes and genitals and death usually occurs about 12 days later.

Vaccines exist for both conditions and are the main means of providing your rabbit with protection. Vaccinations are usually recommended annually, but may be required more often; your vet will advise the most appropriate booster interval for your rabbit. In addition to getting your rabbit vaccinated, it's a good idea to view this visit to the veterinary practitioner as an opportunity for your rabbit to be given a full health check.

Other health conditions to be aware of include dental disease, eye problems and stomach upsets. Rabbits' teeth, for example, may become overlong, creating eating difficulties and causing painful wounds inside the mouth. Your vet can trim overlong incisors.

Eye problems include conjunctivitis (a swelling and soreness of the tissues around the eyes). In most cases your rabbit's face will become stained with excess tears and mucous. This should gently be wiped away with warm water and cotton wool. If the eye problems persist, however, you should visit the vet immediately. Also be aware that swelling of the tissues around the eyes and genitals is often the first symptom of the dreaded myxomatosis virus.

Rabbits may also show signs of nasal discharge, a condition commonly known as 'snuffles'; again medical attention by your veterinary practitioner is required.

The commonest stomach upset is diarrhoea, for which there are many causes such as stress, poor diet, a sudden change of diet or bacterial infection. Look out for the tell-tale signs of weakness and dropping stains around the perineum. Once again, take your pet to the vet as soon as the problem occurs to avoid the condition becoming worse.

Finally, your rabbit's coat should be healthy and shiny (with the possible exception of those who have plucked fur for their nests). Keep a watch for patchy fur loss which may signal skin disease, such as that caused by parasites, bacteria or fungi.

Conclusion

Having looked at some of the more common problems that can affect rabbits, it's important to remember where we began. Rabbits are excellent pets and if you look after yours carefully, they should bring you a lot of enjoyment.

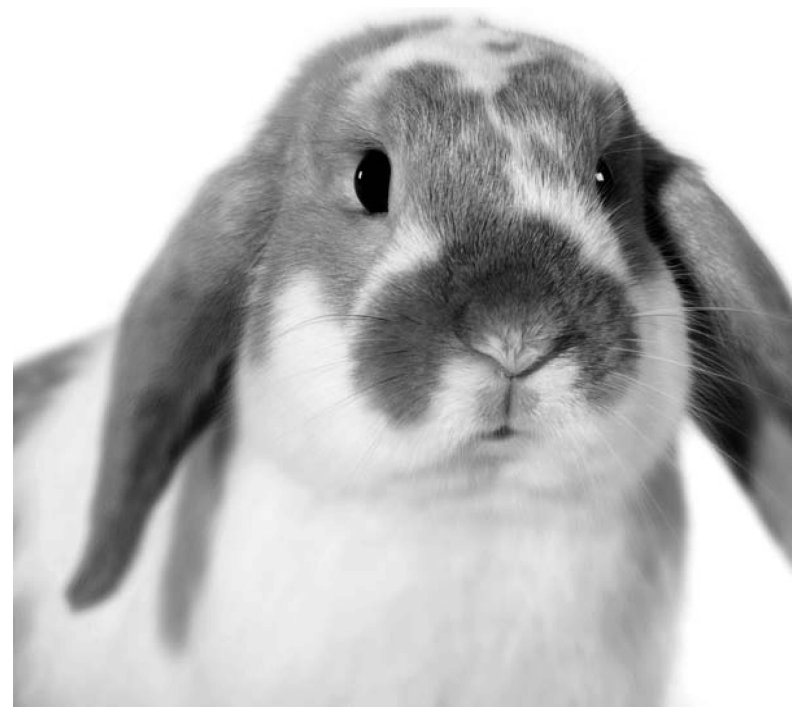


With thanks to Doug Esson, BVSc, MRCVS

Please ask your Veterinary Practitioner for further advice



Caring for your Rabbit



Nobivac 
Essential protection for essential bonds

How to care for your rabbit

Introduction

Rabbits make excellent pets. They are quiet and clean and are generally easy and economic to keep. Like all pets, they require proper health care and attention, including occasional visits to the vet for essential vaccinations. Also, given that a well cared for rabbit may live for around eight years, a decision to buy must be viewed as a long-term commitment.

Choosing your rabbit

There are many different breeds of rabbits offering a wide range of colours and sizes from big Lops and Flemish Giants to compact Chinchillas and Dwarfs. Whichever breed you choose, make sure your rabbit comes from a well-run shop or reputable breeder, is in first class health, and has been properly weaned. Key health points to look for include freedom from runny noses or weeping eyes; clean ears with no build-up or foul smells, teeth which are not overgrown or abnormal in appearance; a clean perineum (the area around the reproductive organs and bottom); and a healthy coat. If in doubt about any of these points, don't buy.



Housing

Your rabbit will need good housing in which to live. If you choose a hutch, it should be large enough to allow your rabbit to move around freely and high enough to allow it to stand upright on its hind legs. It should also be strong enough to withstand unwanted attention from cats, dogs, foxes, etc. Raising the hutch off the ground will reduce the risk of diseases being brought in by rodents. Check that there are no sharp wire mesh ends (or any other part of the structure) which could harm your rabbit.

The hutch should contain a nest box in which your rabbit can feel secure. It should always contain clean, fresh bedding. In addition, your rabbit may choose to improve its comfort by lining it with fur, plucked from its own chest. Don't be alarmed at this behaviour.

It's a good idea for your rabbit to have some exposure to direct sunlight as, like any animal which lives off plants, it needs ultra violet radiation from the sun to manufacture its own vitamin D3 which helps to build healthy teeth and bones. However, don't over-expose your rabbit to the sun, as it could suffer heatstroke.

Bedding

Straw is a safe and effective bedding for your rabbit. Shredded paper is a cheaper option but is a poor absorber of urine and would need to be changed more often than straw. Wood shavings are also commonly used but care must be taken to avoid any sharp pieces which may cause injury or irritation. Bedding should be changed twice a week and the entire hutch should be emptied and cleaned once a week (except when breeding). A disinfectant solution should be used to prevent the build up of potentially harmful bacteria.

Many rabbits will make their toilet in a selected part of the hutch and will normally use only that one area. This makes it easy to remove droppings on a daily basis. Although cleaning out your rabbit's hutch frequently may seem like an unrewarding chore, it is one of the most important contributory factors to your pet's good health.

Handling

The more frequently your rabbit is handled and stroked, the tamer it will become. Use both hands when you pick it up and hold it firmly, but gently. Always support your rabbit's weight with a hand under its hind quarters and keep it close to your body. Never hold a rabbit by its ears.

Exercise

Don't let your rabbit become overweight. As it will spend the bulk of its time in its hutch, you will need to create some opportunities for it to exercise. The easiest option is to allow your rabbit to exercise in your garden, if you have one. Any exercise area must be thoroughly fenced and your rabbit will need to be supervised during exercise. As an alternative to fencing you could use a harness. Many rabbits are quite happy with this. Cat harnesses are usually quite adequate, but make sure it fits snugly. Don't use a collar. It's also vital that you don't let your rabbit onto areas of lawn which have been treated with pesticides or chemicals as these may be harmful.

Feeding

Rabbits are natural vegetarians and should never be offered dairy or animal products to eat. Also, avoid supposed 'treats' such as sweets and chocolate. Most pet rabbits are fed a commercial rabbit pellet and cereal grain mixture, mainly for convenience.



While this is fine, you should make the diet more interesting and natural by adding plants such as dandelions and clovers.

When selecting a pellet, choose one which is fresh and green looking, avoiding excessive amounts of coloured additives. Unfortunately, rabbits don't always know what's best for them. If given a choice they will select tasty flakes and cereal grains, leaving fibre and calcium rich pellets uneaten in their bowl. For this reason, don't give your rabbit new feed until the bowl is nearly empty.

Vegetables can be added but only on a limited basis and not to very young rabbits. Once your rabbit can cope with vegetables, a good choice would include carrots, clover, parsley, peas and green peppers. Don't feed excessive amounts of vegetables and only offer fruit in very small amounts on an occasional basis as they can cause stomach upsets.

The best item to add to your rabbit's diet is a good quality hay, the type available from a supplier of horse feed. Hay is rich in natural fibre and calcium. Make sure any hay you buy is clean and dry, however, as dust, mould and moisture can cause problems.

Don't worry if your rabbit also eats some of its own droppings. This is perfectly normal.

Make sure fresh water is always available, ideally via a drinking bottle.

