



Is Your Bunny Sick

Rabbits are at the bottom of the food chain and in the wild the weakest are the first to be preyed upon. Thus, rabbits instinctively hide illnesses and injuries to avoid detection by animals of prey. This may be a good survival tactic in the wild, but for domestic rabbits, hiding their symptoms of illness only misleads their caretakers and prevents prompt medical attention.

People who live with rabbits need to be particularly attentive to subtle changes in behavior or litterbox habits.

If your rabbit usually greets you with leaps and bounds and he is now lying in the back of his cage or pen when you approach, this could be a cause for concern. Couple this behavior change with no droppings in his litterbox and food left untouched, and you could have a very sick rabbit.

What is “normal” behavior? Some rabbits jump up to greet you; some don’t. Some rabbits are very active, running all over the house; some aren’t. In general, rabbits mellow a bit as they age. A three month old bunny might seem hyperactive compared to a more sedate five year old rabbit. Both activity levels are normal, just different. But this behavior will be consistent and known to you. Any deviation of that behavior could signal illness.

The following information is offered as a layman’s guide to some rabbit ailments. Be sure to find a good veterinarian before your bunny gets sick. When your bunny is ill, you need help quickly and you won’t have time to “shop” for a vet. If you are ever in question about your rabbit’s health, call your veterinarian for advise.

Tooth grinding: Loud tooth grinding is a sure sign of pain. Note: This tooth grinding is different from the softer “tooth purring” you may hear when you snuggle and kiss Bun’s face!

Body Heat: Rabbits regulate body temperature by their ears. Very cold or hot ears could indicate a fever or a drop in body temperature. This, coupled with other warning signs could warrant a trip to the vet.

Runny eyes or nose, labored breathing or chronic sneezing: These could indicate allergies, upper respiratory infection, a blocked tear duct or other problems. See your veterinarian.

Wet chin or drooling: Usually a sign of tooth problems, or malocclusion. You may also notice a decrease in appetite and ability to eat hard foods such as whole carrot. See your veterinarian. Left untreated, tooth problems can lead to infection of the jaw bone, which is very difficult to treat. Depending on the severity of the misalignment, your rabbit’s teeth may need to be trimmed regularly. In severe cases, teeth can be pulled.

Loss of balance or a head tilt: This is most often a sign of wry neck, which is an inner ear infection. This can occur very suddenly. Although treatment can be lengthy, and improvement not noticeable for about 10 days. Wry neck can usually be cured if treatment is begun quickly.

Excessive itching or scratching, head shaking: Fleas, ear mites and/or fur mites are the usual culprits. In some ear mite cases, scabs can be seen in the ear canal. Your veterinarian will decide what treatment is needed. If one rabbit in your house has mites, it is best to have all the rabbits checked, as mites can be transferred easily. Fleas are common in the summer months. Although they may seem harmless, flea infestation can kill rabbits, dogs and cats by causing a deadly case of anemia (speak with a House Rabbit volunteer for ways to rid your home of fleas.)

Sore hocks: This is when the fur on the rabbit's hock, or heal, is worn down to the bare skin or, in severe cases, to the bone. Sometimes the rabbit forms calluses and get along just fine. Problems arise when the skin turns into an open wound. You may notice the rabbit favoring a foot as he tries to avoid putting weight on his hocks. Causes are numerous, including wire cage bottoms with no resting area, a damp resting board, wet bunny beds or dirty litterboxes. Overweight and large breed rabbits are particularly prone to sore hocks, give your rabbit a soft clean resting area. Also, keep your rabbit's weight within normal range, and examine your rabbit regularly.

Blood in the urine, straining to urinate: The two may or may not go hand in hand. While certain foods can turn urine red, actual blood in the urine can be a sign of cancer, bladder infection or urinary stones. If your rabbit is straining to urinate or is "leaking" puddles outside the litterbox, you should be concerned. You may also notice "urine burn," caused when urine soaked fur keeps the skin underneath damp and irritated. Antibiotics maybe needed, so take your rabbit to his veterinarian.

In one end, out the other: Your rabbit's litterbox contains a wealth of information. A healthy digestive tract will produce large, round fecal pellets. Increasingly smaller irregularly shaped droppings or droppings strung together with fur (or carpet) may indicate a problem. Proper grooming by you especially during a molt, and plenty of fresh Timothy hay will help produce optimum digestive tract health.

Lumps and bumps: Abscesses and tumors can be serious and should be checked by your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Loss of appetite or lethargy: Even a rabbit can have a "bad hare day." But if your rabbit refuses his food or any of his special treats, and seems particularly lethargic, you should call your rabbit's veterinarian right away. We encourage you to observe your rabbit's behavior, activity level and droppings daily. Each rabbit is different and knowing what is normal for your rabbit could save his life.



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