

Rabbit Health Information

A brief summary

- ✓ Vaccinate against Viral Haemorrhagic Disease and Myxomatosis
- ✓ Feed an eggcup of dry mix a day and the rest of the diet should be plants
- ✓ Keep an eye out for fly strike

Health Assessment and Vaccination

Unlike dogs and cats, rabbits are prey species and tend to hide any illness until they are very sick. We recommend regular examinations to ensure your rabbit is in good health and annual vaccination against 2 types of virus.

Myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD) are invariably fatal diseases.

Myxomatosis is spread by flies and biting insects and your rabbit is particularly at risk if you live in a area with a large population of wild rabbits. Its signs include swollen eyelids and a discharge. Once your rabbit is infected treatment can be attempted but is rarely effective. Vaccination against myxomatosis normally protects against the disease. It is usually sufficient to vaccinate yearly but if you live in a high risk area, we recommend vaccinating every 6 months. Since myxomatosis is mainly seen in spring, summer and autumn when the insects are about, the most effective time to vaccinate is early spring. In 2007 there was a nationwide outbreak of myxomatosis (which seemed to correspond to a population explosion of mosquitoes) and currently we are recommending vaccination twice a year.

VHD is a highly resistant virus whose main symptom is sudden death although occasionally rabbits will show symptoms of extreme sickness beforehand. Since it is normally fatal before being diagnosed, treatment is almost impossible. The virus is highly resistant to freezing and can last a long time in the environment so can be spread by any object introduced to your rabbit (including foods picked in the meadow) as well as by direct contact with wild rabbits. Thankfully vaccination is very effective but should be done annually.

Nutrition

Rabbits should be fed mainly on grass and hay. We recommend feeding a very small amount (an egg cup a day) of commercial mix to your rabbit to compensate for any mineral deficiencies in the grasses they're eating, but this food should be no more than 3% of your rabbit's body weight per day. There should never be commercial food left in the bowl at the

end of the day. To eat grass and hay a rabbit needs to be hungry and it would probably choose commercial mix over its natural diet if given the choice.

Rabbits have continually growing teeth. If their diet doesn't involve a large amount of gnawing, they will develop dental problems. Dental disease is due to a combination of genetic factors, diet and calcium metabolism. To help metabolise calcium your rabbit requires vitamin D which is activated by sunlight. Thus a diet involving lots of grass and a regular exposure to sunlight will aid in preventing disease. Rabbits intestines are designed to process large amounts of grass and plant material. This roughage is essential for the optimum functioning of their intestines.

Rabbits' diets can be complemented by many other vegetables and greenstuffs listed below. Rabbits should not be fed lettuce since it is nutritionally poor and may give them diarrhoea.

Safe Plants For Rabbits

Grass of any type is safe, palatable and ideal for rabbits. Vaccination against viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD) is advisable due to the risk of transmission from wild rabbits.

Wild plants that are safe include: agrimony, brambles, chickweed, clover, coltsfoot, cow parsnip (hogweed), dandelion, young docks, goosegrass, ground elder, groundsel, knapweed, mallow, mayweed, plantain, raspberry, sea beet, shepherds purse, sow-thistle, trefoil, vetch, wild strawberry and yarrow (NB: Many of these plants are illustrated in Virginia Richardson's book Rabbit Nutrition).

Safe cultivated plants include: artichoke leaves, apple, beetroot, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots and carrot tops, celery, cauliflower leaves, chicory, coriander, corncobs, green beans, kale kohlrabi, lettuce (in moderation), parsley, peapods, pear, parsnip, radish, spinach, spring greens (spring cabbage), sprout peelings, sunflowers plants, swedes, sweetcorn plants, turnips, watercress. N.B. Turnips and Spinach should be fed occasionally (not more than once a week) due to their oxalate content.

Tree leaves can be eaten by rabbits, especially from fruit trees and hazel.

Recognising illness in rabbits

Many rabbits spend a lot of time in a hutch at the bottom of the garden. Unlike dogs and cats, rabbits are prey species. Therefore they will hide any illness until they are very sick. Therefore, a sick rabbit with certain symptoms is much more sick than the equivalent in a dog or cat and you should seek veterinary attention at the first signs of ill health.

Signs your rabbit may be unwell include:

- Not eating their normal amount of food this should be checked on a daily basis

- Not eating food that previously they have enjoyed even if they are still eating other food stuffs
- Not producing faeces
- Unusual behaviour
- Diarrhoea or a dirty bottom
- Weight loss
- Hair loss or scratches on the skin
- Discharges from the eyes, nose or elsewhere
- Drinking more than normal (but always check its not just that the water bottle is leaking!)

Fly strike

A serious illness of pet rabbits is fly strike. This is when a particular fly lays their eggs in your rabbit's skin, normally in a wound or around its bottom. When the maggots hatch they start eating the skin and muscle. The presence of maggots attracts further flies and the condition rapidly becomes serious. If caught early, it can be treated but once past a certain stage it is frequently fatal even if treatment is initiated. Rabbits are particularly at risk if they have open sores, dirty bottoms or live in dirty housing.

Prevention is better than cure. You can prevent flystrike by using a product such as Rearguard in the fly season. This has been designed especially for pet rabbits and will deter flies from laying their eggs on your rabbit. It is easy to use and one application will last for up to 6 week - please ask at reception for further information.

In addition, we recommend checking your rabbit twice daily for any signs of maggots. This involves turning him to look underneath around his/her bottom. If their bottom is dirty, you should clean it and consider booking a consultation with the vet to try find out why this has happened. If you see any small worm type creatures that may be maggots, you should consult a vet immediately.

Housing

Rabbits can either be kept indoors or outside. Their hutch should be as big as possible and certainly big enough for your rabbit to be able to sit up comfortably in and stretch out full on his hind legs. It should be raised off the ground to prevent damp if it's kept outside, and it should have a separate bedding area filled with a suitable nesting material. Many problems can occur due to dirty hutches and your rabbit's hutch should be cleaned out whenever it gets dirty and at least twice weekly.

All rabbits should be allowed to exercise outside in natural light and the safest way to achieve this is to have an enclosed run. The run should have a bedding area or access to the hutch so that if your rabbit is scared or cold, there is somewhere to retreat to.

Neutering

Neutering can have many health benefits especially for female rabbits. It also means that rabbits of different sexes can be kept together without fear of baby rabbits!

Up to 80% of female rabbits suffer from a cancer of the uterus when they are older. Neutering will prevent your rabbit suffering from this. In addition, females can become very aggressive when they come into season and they can be in season almost continually as they mature, neutering may help your rabbit with this type of aggression. Some male rabbits can become very territorial and start marking their area with urine. Neutering may help with this behaviour and also eliminates the risk of testicular cancer or injury to the testicles (a common site for other rabbits to attack.)

Neutering can be performed at 6months old and is called castration in the boys and spaying in the girls.

Microchipping

A microchip with a unique registration number and about the size of a grain of rice is implanted under the skin near the shoulders. This then stays with your rabbit for its life and can be read by special scanners which most veterinary surgeries, animal welfare organisations, animal wardens and some police stations have. This allows a positive identification to be made and for you to be contacted as soon as possible if your rabbit were to stray. Our microchips also have a built in thermometer which helps us avoid using rectal thermometers when your rabbit is ill.