



AGAVE VETERINARY CARE
AND EXOTIC ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Your Complete Rabbit Care Guide

What should you expect from vet visits?

Since rabbits are prey species, they typically try to hide symptoms of illness or disease. They have a shorter life span than dogs and cats, so they age at a relatively faster rate. Rabbits also have teeth that grow constantly throughout their lifetime that can cause problems undetectable at home until they are more severe. Therefore, rabbits should be seen by a knowledgeable veterinarian every six months.

There are two vaccines available for rabbits at this time.

- *Rabbit Hemorrhagic disease (RHD)*
 - RHD is an extremely contagious virus that is spread through direct, nose to nose, and indirect, airborne or consumption, contact with infected rabbits. Some affected rabbits will bleed from their mouth and/or anus, have difficulty breathing, inappetence and fevers. However many rabbits will just suddenly die without warning. It takes only 1-5 days for a rabbit to develop symptoms after being exposed and it is up to 70-80% fatal. The vaccine can be administered as early as seven weeks of age and requires one booster vaccine in three weeks. Thereafter it is repeated annually.
- *Pasteurella*
 - Pasteurella is a bacterial disease that leads to upper respiratory infections in rabbits. Affected rabbits can develop nasal discharge, watery eyes, swelling of the face and difficulty breathing. Treatment is difficult since most strains of Pasteurella are resistant to antibiotics. The Pasteurella vaccine can be given as early as four weeks of age, requires a booster four weeks later, and then is given annually. It is not uncommon for rabbits to develop a lump a few weeks after the vaccine is given. Most of the time the lump will resolve without any treatment within 3-4 weeks.

In addition to the vaccines, rabbits are also screened for intestinal parasites, checked for fleas, examined for evidence of contagious or hereditary disease and acclimated to the veterinary office and team.

What should you feed your bunny?

The most critical part of caring for your rabbit is feeding the proper diet. Wild rabbits spend all of their time eating a variety of grasses, and our pet rabbits should eat a similar diet. There are three components to a high quality rabbit diet:

1. Unlimited hay (typically Timothy or Orchard grass)
2. Plain rabbit pellets (such as Fibre3 and Oxbow) $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup per adult rabbit each day
3. Fresh greens (one handful per 5lb rabbit)

Young rabbits can be given unlimited young rabbit pellets until eight months of age. After this, their pellets should be limited to prevent obesity, diarrhea and overgrown teeth. Pellets that contain additional colorful additives will cause your rabbit to pick out the “junk food” and leave behind the nutritious portion of the diet.

Rabbits have a lot of choices when it comes to hay. Young rabbits are often given alfalfa due to its higher number of calories and calcium. As adult rabbits, they should be slowly switched over to timothy, orchard grass, or oat hay. The majority of your rabbit’s diet should be hay. They should have an unlimited supply to eat whenever they please.

Rabbit should also get a good variety of fresh greens and veggies, including anything from this list:

- Beet greens
- Carrot and carrot tops
- Collard greens
- Kale
- Romaine lettuce
- Mustard greens
- Parsley
- Spinach
- Basil
- Mint
- Cilantro
- Bok Choy
- Dill leaves
- Swiss Chard
- Parsnip

Avoid giving grass you’re gathered from outside. These greens may contain pesticides or could have been eaten by a wild rabbit that has RHD.

Fruit should be left exclusively as treats; think of it as bunny candy. Fruits have a high sugar and fiber count that can lead to GI upset and diarrhea. If given the chance, rabbits would love to eat all the fruit out of their bowl and leave behind any healthy pellets or greens they should be eating instead. Always be sure to remove the seeds and pits from any fruit before giving as they can contain cyanide which can be harmful to your rabbit.

Generally, we recommend avoiding vegetables that can contribute to the formation of gastrointestinal gas, as this can contribute to pain and gastrointestinal stasis. Gassy veggies include broccoli and cabbage.

What is Gastrointestinal (GI) stasis and why is it a big concern?

Gastrointestinal stasis (often just called “stasis”) is when a rabbit stops eating and their stomach, intestines, and cecum stop normal movement. A rabbit’s GI tract has to always be contracting and keeping things moving, providing fiber to the critically important bacteria inside that allow them to metabolize their food. If they stop eating for a few hours, then their guts slow down drastically and the food that is still in their intestines begins to ferment. This can lead to obstruction or excessive gas causing their stomach to bloat. Stasis is painful, and can be fatal if it continues to progress.

While stasis is a well known disease in rabbits, it’s often not the primary problem. Stasis can occur secondary to a variety of issues:

- Stress: Changes in the house, new pets, new kids, moving, changing your rabbit's enclosure, vacations with or without your rabbit, etc.
- Inappropriate diet: feeding too many starchy or sugary treats leads to GI upset
- Overgrown teeth or abscessed teeth that make it painful to eat normally
- Chronic health concerns, infections, etc. can lead to pain or dehydration which can lead to GI stasis even if you are doing everything right.
- Hairballs: When a rabbit is cleaning themselves, it’s possible they can eat a lot of that hair but unlike cats, they can’t vomit it back up meaning it can become matted inside their gut.

If stasis is a consistent recurring issue, then discuss with your vet about what can be done to manage your rabbit health. Some signs to look out for are:

- Smaller than normal stool or no stool at all
- Hiding or in a hunched over position
- Lethargic
- Bloating with a hard stomach
- No gut noises or loud gut noises
- Refusing food, greens or treats

If you notice any of these signs, please bring your rabbit to the vet immediately! Stasis can lead to hypothermia which becomes dangerous very quickly. The sooner you start treatment, the sooner your rabbit will recover!

What other health concerns should you look out for?

Rabbits' teeth never stop growing and therefore, they need to be chewing on something to grind them down. This is why hay is such an important element to their diet. If a rabbit is fed mostly pellets and they don’t eat much hay, they will grow spurs on their molars. Spurs are tiny sharp

points that grow on the molars and make it painful for bunnies to eat. If you notice that your rabbit is eating less, pawing at their face, or is behaving oddly, please bring them into the vet so they can help resolve the issue.

Another tooth issue can be overgrown incisors. This can happen because the teeth are misaligned. The results are teeth that keep growing until they protrude out of the mouth and make it difficult for rabbits to keep eating. This is typically an easy thing to resolve if caught early enough and at the same time the vet can discuss what might be causing this problem.

One important thing to be aware of is that rabbit urine often varies from a yellow to red color. If you see urine of a funky color, but your rabbit is acting normal, don't panic. This doesn't always indicate that they are urinating blood or have a urinary tract infection. If the abnormal color lasts more than a day or two, or if your rabbit has unusual urination habits, lack of appetite, or hunched posture, take them in to see the vet and confirm it's not a medical issue.

Head tilts are another issue you might notice pop up. Head tilts can be caused by a variety of issues, often as a result of a bacterial or parasitic infection. Sometimes the head tilt can be so severe that the rabbits will completely lose their sense of balance and begin to roll. Your rabbit should be seen for medical care immediately if you notice a head tilt, abnormal eye movements, or incoordination.

Why and when should you spay/neuter your rabbit?

Spaying and neutering your pet can be a scary thought for a lot of people. In order to perform the procedure, your rabbit will have to be put under anesthesia. The veterinarian will perform an exam and run blood work prior to the surgery. These are all done to confirm that your pet is healthy enough to go under anesthesia. From there, your pet will be given medication to help them fall asleep and provide pain control. Once the procedure is finished, they will be woken up and monitored for a few hours to confirm that they have recovered well before sending them home.

Female rabbits should be spayed at six months of age. Spaying has many benefits for your rabbit. It significantly reduces the chance of uterine cancer and eliminates the possibility of pregnancy and the complications that can come from being pregnant.

Male rabbits can be neutered as soon as their testicles have dropped, typically between three and six months of age. Neutering your rabbit reduces unwanted territorial and spraying behavior, eliminates the risk of testicular cancer, and prevents him from impregnating another rabbit.

It is important to continue to provide your rabbit's normal diet before surgery (fasting is NOT recommended).

What potential toxins do you need to look out for?

Rabbits are herbivores and have a more restricted diet than humans. There are many toxins that your newly adopted rabbit could get into:

- Cedar and Pine bedding
- Amoxicillin
- Rodenticides, pesticides or insecticides
- Onions, leeks and garlic
- Fruits seeds/pits
- Avocado, Iceberg lettuce and Rhubarb
- Mushrooms
- Dairy products
- Chocolate
- Ivy and Foxglove

If you realize that your rabbit did eat one of these toxins, don't panic. Immediately call your vet, do your best to give them a time, an amount and what exactly your bunny ate. From there, you'll be directed to bring your pet in for treatment and supportive medications.

What kind of cage should your rabbit have?

Rabbits should be kept in enclosures that are at least 4-6 times as big as they are, if not more! Rabbits can be kept in an ex-pen which allows them room to run around. Avoid keeping your bunny on wire flooring as this can cause pain and trauma to their feet. They should be kept on a flat surface, and there should be an area with padded surfaces for them to rest on. Keep an eye out for inflamed sore hocks on the bottom of their hind legs.

Many people allow their rabbit to free-roam throughout their house or in a designated room while they are gone. If you choose to allow your rabbit to stay outside of a cage alone, it is critical that you "bunny proof" the area first. Protect the walls and baseboards with caging around the perimeter of the room and make sure electrical cords are securely out of reach.

You should always keep your rabbits indoors and away from predators. Rabbits are prey animals and it is possible to frighten them to death so they can be in danger even if wildlife can't attack your rabbit. Keep in mind that dogs and cats are our pets but they are still predators to rabbits and you should never leave them alone when they can still see or have access to one another.

Grooming and why it's necessary

Rabbits will typically molt four times a year with heavy molts being in spring and autumn. This means they shed a lot of hair for 2-6 weeks straight. It's especially heavy during the spring due to their winter coat falling out in preparation for the summer.

Grooming is very important as a bunny owner whether your rabbit has long or short hair. As you will come to find out, rabbits will groom themselves non stop just like a cat. Unfortunately, unlike cats who vomit up excess hair, rabbits are unable to vomit and that excess hair becomes trapped in their intestines. The hair slowly gets tangled with food and can form an obstruction in the GI tract which can lead to stasis.

Rabbits should be brushed weekly if possible, and more frequently during a molt. Clumps of hair can be carefully pulled. If you are using your hands, be very careful to pull gently and ensure you don't rip their skin in the process. Rabbit skin is very thin and actually made to tear, so stop if you feel any resistance during this process. Bald spots can pop up during molting season as well; just give it a week or so to grow back.

Regular brushing also helps to prevent painful matting around the ears and hind end of your bunny. This will become more common as your rabbit grows older and begins to have difficulties with grooming. Matts can also collect fecal matter, particularly if your rabbit is having soft stool, and develop a skin infection as a result.

If you notice that your rabbit does have matted fur, a therapeutic shave at the vet may be indicated. Never use scissors to remove matting as lacerations are common with this technique.

You should avoid shaving the hair off of rabbit's feet. Unlike other animals, rabbits don't have paw pads. The fur on their feet provides cushion and prevents sores from developing on their feet. Once it's shaved off, sores quickly develop and prevent the hair from growing back.

You should also NEVER give your rabbit a bath. Bathing a rabbit is a stressful incident for them which can lead to health issues if your rabbit panics and/or accidentally breathes in the bath water. In addition, being wet can lead rabbits to become dangerously cold, especially since a normal rabbit temperature is around 101-103.5. Rabbits can be spot cleaned to remove feces or other substances from the fur or skin if needed. Limit the water to only the areas that need to be cleaned and dry the hair thoroughly.

Works Cited

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